

# GOOD GUYS DON'T DATE BAD BOYS

Laura S. Fox

## CAMPUS LIFE DO'S AND DONT'S

BOOKS BEFORE HOOKS  
DON'T KNOCK - SOMEONE  
MIGHT ANSWER

THERE CAN ONLY BE ONE  
KING

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REALEST  
NEWS  
YOU'LL  
EVER READ

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# **Good Guys Don't Date Bad Boys**

**by**

**Laura S. Fox**

## *Acknowledgements*

### *For all my amazing patrons who made this story a reality*

*Dave K, J Q, Adam, Green TreeMan, Candace, Raymond, Joe M, Lucas, Daniel, Margaret, Joseph Sh, Tisha, Laura, Todd, Erin, Ilze, Joshua, Sarah, Anthony, David S, James, Kate, Nash, Peethree, Timothy, AC(XXL), P Ber, DJ, Curtis, Gunthorp, deedee, kevin, Maximilian, MKFanatic, Joanne, wiscguy87, Annis, Silanka, MH, William, EJ, Neysh, Angela, Sonija, UnivrsLVR, AYoung, Keith, Laura P, rowenayesha, Ryan T, Jase, Jonatank, Nts, Richard H, Wilhop, Amber, Jay, Matt, Posamunde, Sarah J, bertiebubble, Pablo, Angie, Richard G, Rosemary, Anthony S, Christopher, Russell, Steve D, Alexandre, Rutzky, Elisabetta, Alexandra, neesan, John, Tim, Kyle, Lucy, Suzanne, Net, Colleen, Jean-François, Mneupsis, Parker, Steve, Ted, C, Bruce, Lauren, David L, Ian, SGG, LadyJ, Gabrielw, Frank, Catherine, Michelle, NJ, Wayne, Peter, Clement, Andrew O, Suren, Odd, Joseph S, Bill, KelleyThatsMe, Coy, GregW500, Timothy W, Colleen M, John A, Jasmine B, John G, William B, oja bella, AndyBen, Slappybones13, Steve J, crawfish, K, Yannis, Stephen B, Lord Matton, Lewis, Mats, Kasper, Jorne, Pamzy, Eric, Chris, Aline, Bradley, Emma, Charlotte S, Victor, George, Marie, John C, Shawn, Bo, David S, Debbie, Donald L, GM, HBSuth, Jeffrey, John S, mlhee4, Niniusjolibus, P Braun, Sagar, Sam, Satias, Alex R, Geoffrey S, Jerry, Anthony, Anthony N, buubuubaby, Ike, Karel, Leo, Adrian, Ang, Hagen, Jason, Jermaine, Kan, Kseniia, Lord Nynex, mahs hkgi, MaryAnn, ni13, Aaron B, Amar, chexmix, Dawn D, Justme21, Rubicon, Ken P, Stan, Jessica, Ano, Vincent, Michael B, Stuart, Michael R, Daniel, Jannel, A.S12, Aaron O, Anthony P, Bee, chris t, Duncan, Jacob K, John D, Michael P, Raul, Carston, A, Ivan, Jose, Kevin D, Khoa Le, Luka, Ramflo, Ryan, Thomas W, Yvette, mary m, Tyron, Joseph N, Leda, S, Felix, greg r, Brandon W, Eric, James J, Juan, Michael W, Tim R, Isma, Mike, Rob W, Youl Correa, Emma J, Lizzypai, Matty, Sajid, Shelly, TJ, Marty, Hayden, Giovanni, Aaron W, Andrew Ross B, Brandon B, Les Theriot, Nico, Tim, tovnucut, Metro, Stephan, Gabriel R, Jeremy, Fredrik, Bogdan, Harry, Joshua, ken, nifty.stories, Paul, Ryan W, SteviiGee, tiziano, Anand, Wyndham, Priesta, Chad, Cody, DESunny, Gary, Laila, Quttzik, Tim McD, Elle, Guido SeventyEight, Dantalien, Oudoud87, Ana L, James A, Richard John A, Maureen, Sebastiano, David T, Matthew, Alhamdi, hamadbakhsh, Gernot, Mats S, kabut11, Laëtitia, Yaiza, Matthias, Bruce A, Kenny, Roberto, Albert, C Evan, Cassidy, Francis, Jack, Tom, Richard S, martajarzabek, Rachel, Amarna, Antwoin, ASea, Corrupted- Shots, Dark Star, Jason L, Jayce, Lonnie, M, A, Zeth, Sid*

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**M/M Fiction**

**Intended for Mature Audiences Only**

This book contains graphic depictions of sexual intercourse between men, and it is not meant for readers who are less than 18 years of age.

## *Chapter One – Insta-hate*

A new beginning. It was, after all, what he wanted after all that wallowing in self-deprecation, and it had to be here, at Sunny Hill, away from all the drama. Jonathan sighed as he arranged his toiletries in an orderly fashion on the bathroom shelf. He was more than thankful for the small suite designed to accommodate him and another student, which was a far cry from the dorm doubles and communal bathrooms that were the norm.

Not that he had lived in such a place before coming here. Before, he had been someone, but like any other ‘someone’ having to atone for past mistakes, getting down from his high horse and accept sharing living space with another human being were part of the deal.

He frowned as he pushed the toothbrush stand to align perfectly with his shaving cream. “Get used to it,” he addressed his mirror reflection.

Indulging in more self-pity over his current situation was cut short by the front door opening and closing. It could only be his roommate, and while Jonathan would rather go through nail-pulling medieval tortures than face the nightmare that this person had to be, given his luck of late, he needed to face the music sooner rather than later.

He walked out of the bathroom, all the while trying hard to school his face into a neutral expression. Silently, he prayed that his partner wasn’t some jock, but since those usually shared their notoriously loud fraternity houses, the chances were slim.

Talk about small mercies. Jonathan’s eyes fell on a young man, or better said, on a giant backpack that practically obscured its owner almost entirely from view. Not a jock, obviously. His roommate appeared to be small-framed.

He cleared his throat discreetly, which prompted the stranger, who must not have heard him moving about, to turn abruptly and lose his balance. For a moment or two, his arms flailed comically. Fortunately for him, the bed was right behind him, so he landed on a soft spot.

Jonathan hurried to help the hapless young man. “Oh, I’m so terribly sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you. Are you all right?”

He offered him a hand, and the stranger took it. A large grin lit up his face. He was nerdy, but in a cute way, Jonathan noticed right away and proceeded to chastise himself inwardly for judging a person by his looks. However, he couldn’t deny that his roommate didn’t look at all like he could pose a threat. Bright brown eyes twinkled at him from under a mop of chestnut hair.

“Uber fine,” the young man replied. “Do you think you could help me get out of this?” He pointed at his huge backpack.

“Of course.” Jonathan hurried to unbuckle the monstrous thing and help his roommate out of his predicament.

Finally released from the contraption, the guy pushed back the strands hanging over his eyes and offered his hand. "I'm Ray."

Jonathan shook his hand curtly. "Glad to meet you, Ray. I'm Jonathan. Jonathan Hamilton."

"Oh, we're doing full names." Ray beamed at him. "Ray Franklin."

Jonathan could barely keep from smiling back. And he had promised himself that he would be more guarded regarding new acquaintances. It was because of his lack of awareness that he had landed in this situation, being forced to change schools before his junior year.

Another promise he had made to himself was to make sure there was no room for any misunderstandings. "I don't want to sound too forward," he began quickly, to avoid any stalling rooted in his lack of trust in humanity in general, "but I need to let you know something from the start."

Ray was dressed in a striped shirt and kakis that both seemed a bit too large for his frame. He shifted his weight from one foot to another. He looked fairly harmless. "Sure."

Jonathan took one deep breath. "I'm gay. I hope that's not going to be a problem, but if it is, I believe --"

"No problem." Ray stopped him right away and shot another dazzling smile at him. He leaned toward Jonathan and threw him a conspiratorial look. "To tell you the truth, I only last year came out as straight, so." He let the words hang and wiggled his eyebrows.

Jonathan's lips twitched in amusement. As miserable as he had felt only minutes ago, it seemed as if Ray had just walked through the door with the last remnants of the summer sun.

"Ah, so do I gather that a lot of people simply assume that you're gay?" he asked.

Ray let out a heartfelt sigh and rolled his eyes. "You wouldn't believe it. You can imagine what it does to my dating game. Girls only want me to be their gay-best-friend-for-now."

"I had no idea that was a thing."

"Apparently, yes. Trust me, I accidentally became well-versed in everything gay because of all those misunderstandings. I even watched reruns of *Queer as Folk* with attempted girlfriend number three."

"That must have been quite the experience," Jonathan said, not really knowing how to offer comfort for something like that.

Ray grinned. "Yeah. By season four, she still hadn't realized I was actually into her."

"What happened by season five, then?"

“She thought she must have corrupted me somehow and confessed that she didn’t want to turn me straight. At that point, I almost wanted to go along with it and tell her that she was the best conversion therapy ever so she should assume responsibility.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No. I told her the truth. She was really surprised. And we remained friends. Sort of. Let’s just say that I had to finish watching season five by myself.”

Jonathan could feel his cheeks hurting from grinning too much. Whatever Ray had, it was highly infectious. Two minutes in with the guy and he had made him forget all his worries.

“Well, Ray, I promise I’m not going to torture you with gay-themed shows from fifteen years ago.”

Ray plunked on the bed. “No worries. I actually enjoyed it. But man, this year, I really need to get my dating game in shape. I just transferred here, and I hope that girls will see more in me than just a gay--”

“—best-friend-for-now,” Jonathan completed the sentence. A slow frown made its way up to his forehead. “Then I suppose you won’t want to hang around with me much.” He hadn’t wanted to be so blunt, but directness was just one of those curses he couldn’t shake off if they were the death of him.

“Nonsense!” Ray bounced on his bed, checking the springs. “That’s one more reason to hang out together, besides that you look like a swell guy, and I think we’re going to get along just fine.”

Jonathan had no idea what to say. It was challenging to fight against the warm feeling spreading through his chest. “I do?” he asked hesitantly. “Look like a swell guy, I mean.”

Ray nodded enthusiastically. “You totally do. And you’ll be the perfect wingman. Here is what we’re going to do. Girls will surely want to know about you because you’re so handsome. They will approach me,” he pointed at himself, “because they will think I can help them get with you. And then,” he made a convincing circle through the air with his index finger, “we will drop the bomb on them.”

“The bomb?” Jonathan asked, slightly confused.

“Yes. We will tell them that one of us is gay, and the other is straight, and have them guess. The loser has to go out with me. Score!” He threw one victorious punch in the air.

“That’s quite the plan,” Jonathan agreed. “So, you’re saying that I don’t look gay?” He was genuinely interested in the answer.

Ray gave him a long and thoughtful once-over. “You do have perfect fashion sense, in a preppy way. But that’s like the only gay thing I can say about you. And when I say gay, I mean fabulous. I suppose people don’t think broad-shouldered, tall, and handsome guys like you are necessarily gay. But,” he pointed again at himself, “lanky, awkward, and nerdy somehow equals gay in their book.”

“I don’t think you’ve met enough people yet,” Jonathan offered a smidge of comfort. “Thank you for considering me handsome. If it’s any consolation, you don’t look gay to me. Although it does worry me a little that I don’t look gay to you. I’d rather not have people make wrong assumptions.”

“I don’t label people,” Ray said with another big smile. “So, now that you told your bestie your biggest secret, what’s your dating game?”

Bestie? Jonathan couldn’t remember when that had been established, but since Ray seemed so incredibly happy with the prospect, he couldn’t reject him outright. “I just transferred, like you, so I haven’t yet thought about it.” Not entirely true, but he could unveil his plans later to his nosy roommate if, indeed, they got along well.

“Cool. At least that means that I won’t be the only odd man out. We’ll be the new guys. Maybe even start a band. The New Guys.” Ray made a semi-circle with a sweep of the hand as if he could already see that name up in lights.

“Unfortunately, I’m not in the least adept at playing a musical instrument, and if you heard me sing, you would wish you just developed enough earwax to block the horrendous sounds leaving my throat.”

Ray laughed whole-heartedly. “That makes two of us. Anyway, do you have a boyfriend?”

Jonathan shook his head quickly. “No.”

Ray clapped in glee. “That’s great. We will look for love together this year. I mean, if you’re into love. If you’re into hookups --”

Jonathan shook his head. Hookup was a dreaded word and forever would be in his dictionary. “No, not at all.”

One hookup gone bad had been enough to destroy his reputation and life as he had known it up to that point. His parents didn’t need another shock of that proportion. Only thinking of it made Jonathan feel his cheeks on fire.

“Ah, I dream of a nice girl who won’t mind getting my V card,” Ray said with an exaggerated sigh.

“V card?” Jonathan asked. Did people talk like that?

Ray offered him a sympathetic look. “Too much info? I’m afraid your bestie is not the kind to keep secrets. Also, it’s great that we have two bedrooms. You will hate me soon enough for my sloppy ways.”

Jonathan smiled. “How bad can it be?”

Ray patted his huge backpack. “My entire life is in here. And not in a particular order if you catch my drift.”

“I see. I’ll let you unpack. I placed my toiletries on the left side of the shelf in the bathroom, but if you prefer it, I can move them.”

Ray waved. “Don’t worry. Hey, Jonathan,” he called after him as he started to walk away. “We’ll have a great junior year. It’s a promise.”

Jonathan smiled at his roommate again. At least, that was out of the way. Of course, he would have to curb Ray’s enthusiasm regarding having some common dating game. Unlike before, when he had made the mistake of thinking with what lay right under his belt, this time, if the opportunity arose, he would go for the safe option.

Which meant, of course, someone who was out and proud and not asking for oral sex on the down-low while pretending to be heterosexual in all the other dealings of his life. Yes, Jonathan had had enough of that to last him three lifetimes, not one.

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“As the new kids,” Ray started the moment they were seated at a table in the dining hall that was packed for lunch hour, “we need to learn who’s who and fast.”

“Do you intend to be popular?” Jonathan questioned while he eyed the fries on his plate with a dubious look. They looked greasy and unpalatable, but together with the salad he had chosen, they could be considered a meal. Not a decent meal, mind you, but still.

“Hey, it’s all about knowing who’s worth knowing, right?” Ray said with a shrug. Unlike Jonathan, he was taking bites from his hamburger like he hadn’t had a proper meal in weeks. “The thing is popular students are the gateway to, you know, meeting others.”

“Do you want to hang out with the popular girls?” Jonathan teased. “Come on, Ray, that’s superficial. And I thought you were looking for true love.”

“Yeah, but it might take me a few tries to get there. Anywho, I did my research and --”

“Research? When did you have time for it? Only a few days ago, we were still unpacking.” Jonathan looked at the dressing packet and decided to skip it. It was good that their small suite had a kitchenette that could be used for some basic cooking.

“Sunny Hill Xpress,” Ray said with satisfaction.

“What’s that?”

“A very interesting digital publication that documents who’s who here, at Sunny Hill. It even has pictures and stuff.”

“Like Facebook?”

“Better.” Ray could barely wait to share the fruits of his research with Jonathan. “This website lets you in on the latest gossip, down to the juiciest details. Whoever is behind it, I’m telling you, they’re not mincing words.”

“So it’s a tabloid,” Jonathan said. He felt a growing unease at the thought. A quick look around half-convinced him that wannabe paparazzi weren’t present. His shoulders relaxed an inch. One thing he had to do was to convince himself that finally, here, at Sunny Hill, Jonathan Hamilton was nobody, and he had every intention to remain so. “Don’t believe everything it says in there.”

“Hey, it was really educational, and why are we here, in these esteemed halls of learning if not to get an education?”

Jonathan doubted he could successfully argue with Ray on any topic. “I suppose,” he admitted with a slight shrug.

“Come on, JJ, don’t you want to know who’s gay, single, and out and proud on top of everything else?”

In a moment of weakness, or just because Ray had insisted like a cat smelling catnip, he had admitted to his dating game being precisely that. While he had every intention to settle for something serious this time, Jonathan didn’t want to jump into it just yet.

“So, who’s the most important kid around here? Or kids?” he asked, wanting Ray and his matchmaking aspirations to steer clear of that topic.

“Gosh, JJ, you talk like you’re eighty,” Ray replied with a wave of the hand.

Another thing he had no idea of was when he had become a JJ. There was just something about Ray that made him accept everything the guy was throwing at him. All that talking about them becoming besties no longer seemed so far-fetched.

“Look,” Ray began and turned in his seat to point at a table several feet away from them.

The first thing Jonathan noticed was a red football jersey stretching across a back so large that a few stadiums had to be needed to accommodate such a presence. The student was standing, masking the view to his table, but the others were so rowdy that they were hard to miss. People walking by stopped to talk to them, high-fiving and doing all the inane things popular kids did.

The giant finally sat down, so Ray continued. “That’s Dexter Solomon, Dex as his friends call him. He plays football, and rumor has it that he can drink an entire keg by himself. According to Xpress, he has done it at least once.”

“What a cliché,” Jonathan murmured.

“The brunet by his right,” Ray said, unfazed by his commentary, “is Kane Dubois. His dad attended Sunny Hill in his time and is now a big shot in the big pharma industry. He’s someone good to know.”

Ray wasn’t off the mark with that. As chemistry majors, going into the pharmaceutical business was an option to consider. Jonathan examined Kane briefly. He looked athletic as well, not as big as Dex but impressive in his own right. As he had expected, Ray was drawn like a moth to a flame to the jock club, or one of the many.

“Kane plays lacrosse,” Ray added. “And that’s Rusty Parker.”

Jonathan examined the attractive blond with the dog-like name, who stood up and landed a perfect shot using a crumpled napkin turned into a ball to send through the improvised hoop offered by the linked arms of an equally attractive female student who screeched in delight. Ray didn’t need to tell him what sport he was into. What a tedious display.

Of course, they were also the kind to score, Jonathan thought and shook his head. His eyes drifted, and then he noticed that there was someone else at the table. Unlike his companions that seemed as rambunctious as kids functioning on a megaton of candy, this one lounged in his chair, one arm wrapped lazily around the back of his buddy’s seat, and one long denim-clad leg stretched outside the table, right into the walking path between the tables.

Jonathan’s eyes narrowed as he noticed the student’s other hand fiddling with some white stick stuck into his mouth. Was that a cigarette? Really?

No, it was a lollipop, Jonathan realized. And perfect lips were wrapping around it with lustful abandon.

Lustful abandon? He needed to have his head checked. The guy was just enjoying his lollipop. Unnerved by where his thoughts were taking him so early in the day, Jonathan continued to examine the student. Rebellious ink-black hair covered his eyes, but a chiseled jawline and a tanned complexion were visible from that distance even. There was something playful and mischievous in how he rolled the candy in his mouth, only to extract it now and then to exchange a joke with his friends. Something languid and predatory lurked in his moves, a proof of the devil-may-care attitude that appeared to define this particular character.

Apparently, he was much in a lyrical disposition today, so Jonathan decided not to fight it. Nothing could go wrong if he only looked at that perfect specimen of the male variety. He barely

kept in a small snort at the sight of the rolled-up t-shirt sleeves. So the perfect specimen was kind of a douche, no wonder there. Not that his impressive biceps weren't worth displaying, or his perfect pectorals, clearly visible through the white t-shirt so glued to him that it looked more like a second skin and less an article of clothing.

There was a place and time for everything, including showing off one's assets, but lunch in the college dining hall wasn't one of them.

"Who's that?" Jonathan asked, suddenly aware that he had tuned out Ray's chatter while lost in admiration of that student.

"That's Maddox Kingsley," Ray replied, excited that finally, Jonathan seemed interested in something he knew. "Or Mad Dawg, as people call him."

"Mad Dog?"

"No, no, no," Ray said with self-importance. "Say it with me. Mad Dawg." He drawled the words like an extra in a gangster movie.

"As you say," Jonathan replied. "What sports is he into? He hangs out with other jocks, so--"

"He's not actually a jock. What he is into," Ray leaned over the table and dropped his voice, "is actually illegal fights."

"I call bollocks on that."

"Call whatever you want. But he's wild, dangerous, and all the girls want him."

"Can't say that I'm surprised."

Ray didn't seem to catch on to the sarcasm in his voice. "The point is, he's the best, the ultimate, the BMOG."

"Do you mind using plain English?"

"The big man on campus," Ray said in a tone that was suggesting that Jonathan had just crawled out from under a rock. "We need to become friends with him."

"No, we don't," Jonathan retorted.

"Why?" Ray eyed him with suspicion.

Because Maddox, Mad Dawg, or whatever his moniker, was a nightmare dressed in a tight t-shirt that left nothing to the imagination regarding the perfect anatomy of his upper body. If he were to take the long leg stretched as an obstacle for the other students happening by as any indication, the lower part had to be just as well built. Jonathan had no intention to go down the same road

again even if the guy were interested, which was out of the question since the mention of girls throwing themselves at him had made that aspect painfully clear.

“Because such guys would never hang out with us,” Jonathan attempted to let Ray down gently.

“Why?” Ray asked again.

“Because we’re good guys. They,” Jonathan pointed at the rowdy group, “are bad boys. Oil and water. We don’t mix, okay? And I bet he’s peddling drugs or something. Just look how many people stop by. What could they want?”

Ray didn’t seem wholly convinced. “Xpress didn’t confirm the rumors on the drugs thing. Hey, I think I want another soda.”

So there was a drugs thing, not that Jonathan would believe everything some obscure tabloid was saying. But anything he could tell himself to stop drooling over a straight bad boy was worth taking into consideration.

“I’ll go,” Jonathan offered. He didn’t need another soda; he would have plain water if they had such a thing.

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“Man, it’s good to be back, right?” Dex stretched and yawned, making a display of his body and drawing the attention of at least half the female population present.

Maddox snorted. “What’s with you? Didn’t you get your beauty sleep?”

“I partied with my buddies back home until late. Then I drove here.”

That was Dex for you, of course. Party animal down to the last bone in his body.

“You’re not going to start telling over the summer stories like we’re in third grade, right?” Rusty intervened. “I’m more interested in the bountiful future, aka the fresh meat.”

“Aren’t you tired of hooking up with all the newbies?” Kane questioned.

Unlike the rest of them who played the field, Kane was the only one in a serious relationship. What was more admirable, he and his girlfriend didn’t attend the same college, and they still made it work despite the distance. Maddox expected Kane to tie the knot and invite them to a big-ass wedding soon after senior year. But there was still time for them to party freely since junior year was just starting.

“Hey, they want me,” Rusty said. “And I never say ‘no’ to a lady.”

“Yeah, you’re the perfect gentleman,” Kane commented. “There are also a few fresh off the boat transfers. Are you interested in them, too?”

“To our year? Yeah, I’m interested, as long as they’re hot,” Rusty replied.

Maddox let his eyes travel over the packed cafeteria in search, just like Rusty, of new faces. Or better said, new butts, since he was known far and wide as a total ass man. Just as he was eyeing a petite brunette packed in all the right places, something else entered his line of vision. Or better said, someone, a guy standing in line. It had to be one of the transfer students Kane was talking about because nothing in the way he carried himself said he was a freshman. Maddox examined the stranger’s profile with interest. He was dressed in sandy chinos and a light pink polo shirt. The clothes looked great on him, like they had been tailored, not bought off the rack. Complete with the oxfords on his feet, his outfit screamed conservative and old money. When the guy put his hands into his pockets, the chinos stretched over a fine piece of tail. Even as a straight guy, Maddox couldn’t help but notice when dudes had nice asses. This one topped many, tight and perky, and filling up those pants just about right.

The next thing Maddox noticed was that the guy was tall. Maddox didn’t consider himself short at his six foot two, but this guy looked a bit taller than that. Among the other students, he was easy to spot. Maybe it was because of his impeccable clothes or his impeccable hairdo. His wavy light brown hair was styled in a preppy side-part, and he looked like someone who went through great pains to look that perfect. As he turned his head, Maddox also had the chance to examine a classic profile with a straight nose and high cheekbones. His face could have been considered a bit too harsh, but it was well balanced by a sensual mouth. Not that Maddox usually thought of guys in terms like that, but this one was a stunner, like movie star level. A movie star from the 1950s, mind you, but one nonetheless.

“Who’s that?” He pointed with his lollipop at the guy.

“Who? The petite brunette? I call dibs, bro,” Rusty said promptly.

“Why would you call dibs so early in the day? I barely woke up,” Maddox protested. “I didn’t mean her. Him.” He pointed again.

“Wow, who’s Mr. President-in-the-making?” Rusty asked.

“Must be one of the transfer students,” Kane piped in. “Dude’s a looker. You guys should watch out, or the girls might forget entirely about you and line up for him.”

Rusty snorted. “Yeah, like who’s into the preppy look nowadays? I bet he’s boring as hell. Girls won’t make any sort of line for him, don’t worry, unless they want to hook up with a grandpa.”

“Someone’s jealous already,” Kane said with a chuckle.

Rusty ran one hand through his tousled hair, suddenly aware of how he might look if compared to the guy they were gossiping about. “Me? Jealous? Nah, no way. Well, if he dares to be more popular than me with the ladies, I’ll challenge him to a duel or some shit.”

“Like a rap battle?” Kane asked.

“No, I’ll just have him play ball against me. We’ll see then who’s the tough guy.”

“Dude’s pretty tall. What if he beats you with your own weapons?” Kane raised a philosophical question right away. “Then he’ll really get all the girls and humiliate you in the process, too.”

“I wouldn’t worry if I were you,” Dex finally joined in the conversation. Their giant friend got any girl he wanted without even trying, and that made him pretty chill. Rusty was the one with a bone to pick all the time, and Maddox simply didn’t care. If a chick digged any of his friends, he was hands-off.

Still, Dex’s comment made him curious. “Why shouldn’t we worry? Dude’s got class,” he said. “Chicks dig that.”

“Yeah, but he’s gay,” Dex said matter-of-factly.

“What?” Rusty exclaimed, a bit too loud. “Guys, just explain to me how this red-blooded, 100% straight mofo, can tell such a thing just by looking at a dude.”

“It may be that his folks passed the gaydar on to him,” Kane said promptly. “Like a family heirloom.”

That kind of banter was totally allowed in their tight-knit group. Dex had two awesome dads who had raised him since they had adopted him at the age of five. Although young enough not to recall in too great detail the pain of having been abandoned by his biological parents, Dex had a few scars of his own, which Maddox understood and respected. He also knew that Dex adored his dads, and they were his number one fans, too.

“No way he’s gay,” Rusty insisted, while Maddox stared at the guy’s perfect ass with renewed interest. With an ass like that, he had to be a bottom, even if, otherwise, there was something domineering and even slightly intimidating in how he held himself. It had to be because of his height, or broad shoulders, or something like that. At least vers or else having that kind of ass was an injustice to all. “Dex, you gotta tell us how you know.”

Dex pointed with his soda can. “Do you see the petite brunette you’ve all been calling dibs on? For the last five minutes, while you kept flapping your traps, she’s been trying to get his attention. All she got from him were a few words. Not once has the dude checked out her rack. And I mean, look at that rack. He only looked at her face while talking.”

“So maybe he’s not into boobs,” Rusty protested. “Or like Kane, already got his ball and chain.”

“Shut up, dude. I have a girlfriend, not a life sentence. And I can tell that girl is pretty. Quite curvaceous and filled out in all the right places,” Kane added. “It’s not like I’m blind.”

Dex shrugged. “You guys don’t have to believe me. But dude’s also got ass. My educated guess is that he’s into dudes, and I stand by it.”

So Maddox wasn’t the only one to notice the guy’s perfect behind.

Rusty angled his head and took a long, thoughtful look at the new student. “If I were gay, I’d totally hit that.”

“You’d hit on a grandma while helping her cross the street,” Kane shot at him, probably still salty over Rusty’s teasing from earlier.

“Yeah, if I were into old people. But I’m not,” Rusty replied, utterly unfazed by Kane’s remark. “I was just saying if I were gay. Come on, now that I know that he’s not into chicks, I can confirm that he’s like a gay guy’s wet dream with all that junk inside his trunk.”

“You’re all a bunch of pervs, commenting on a guy’s ass like that,” Dex said with a large grin. “Seeing how none of you is gay.”

Rusty bristled at that. “Hey, you brought it up. But do we have a name for Mr. Presidential Candidate slash Perfect Ass?”

Maddox surprised them by getting to his feet. “I’ll go and find out.”

He didn’t wait for the others to comment on his sudden decision. After all, he was easygoing and always made friends the fastest of them all. Finding out the new student’s name would be a piece of cake. Why he was so interested in finding it out, he couldn’t say.

“Hey, do you think you could let me cut in line? My friends are really thirsty and impatient like three-year-olds,” he asked the petite brunette who flashed a much-interested smile at him the moment he started talking.

“Sure,” she replied and allowed him to step in front of her.

“Thanks, gorgeous,” he replied and winked at her.

She smiled and bit her lower lip and seemed about to say something, but he forgot all about her the moment he took a closer look at the guy—Yeap, definitely taller than him by an inch or so. Amber eyes stared at him for a moment and then started moving away, seemingly bored.

“Hey, it looks like you’re new here. I’m Maddox.” He offered his hand.

The amber eyes rested on him and the perfectly arched eyebrows above them knitted into a frown. “And I’m not interested.”

Maddox remained unmoved for a second. Say what? “Interested in what?” he asked with a snort.

“Whatever it is you’re selling.” The guy had the nerve to look away from him. “A soda and a glass of water, please,” he told the girl behind the register. “Tap water. Yes.”

Maddox could feel his fingers itching to grab the guy by the front of his polo shirt. He had a burning desire to ask him what the hell his problem was. Instead, he settled for a low rumble under his breath.

The guy snapped at him. “Did you just growl at me?” The girl at the register handed him the soda and the glass of water. “What a jerk,” he threw over his shoulder as he moved away.

“Stuck up prick,” Maddox called after him, too dumbfounded for a smarter comeback than that.

The guy didn’t even turn to look at him. Maddox shook his head in disbelief and stormed back to his table.

“Didn’t you want something?” The girl who had let him cut in line shouted after him.

“Another time,” Maddox replied quickly.

He plopped into his seat and let out a loud huff.

“What the hell happened over there?” Kane asked.

“I officially hate that dude’s guts, whoever he is,” Maddox offered promptly. “He’s an arrogant asshole,” he added, as all his friends were staring at him, waiting for him to elaborate on that.

“So, you didn’t get his name?” Rusty asked.

Maddox looked at him like he was growing another head.

“What about the girl’s?” Rusty asked again, unfazed by his glare.

“What girl?” Maddox bristled with annoyance.

Rusty grinned. “Totally calling dibs, man.”

Maddox stuffed the lollipop back into his mouth. His day was fucking ruined. Amber eyes slash sexy ass could go fuck himself.

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“O.M.G. Did Maddox just talk to you?”

Jonathan placed the soda can in front of Ray while congratulating himself for having a steady hand despite the knots in his stomach. The guy had to have gorgeous gray eyes fringed by dark

eyelashes and a smile that could make panties drop at a moment's notice. Could he be more ridiculously attractive? On top of everything, he had just had to sneak up on him like that, taking him completely by surprise.

"No, not really," he replied stiffly.

"Come on, I saw it," Ray insisted. "He wanted to introduce himself, right?"

"He basically growled at me. No wonder people call him a mad dog."

"Mad Dawg," Ray said.

"Whatever."

"What happened? That was a pretty intense moment there."

"I, well, I thought he was trying to push some drugs on me. I might have said something to that effect," Jonathan settled for the truth.

"O.M.G., why did you say that? I told you the rumors weren't confirmed."

Jonathan shook his head. What was he getting so worked up about? "It was a knee jerk reaction, what can I say? The guy looks like a drug dealer. And he growled at me," he added. "I'm sorry, Ray, but I don't think we're going to hang out with Mad Dawg anytime soon," he emphasized the moniker, "and his merry men."

"What about him makes you think he's a drug dealer?" Ray asked, still flabbergasted apparently over what had happened. "Man, that moment looked like insta-hate from here," he concluded. "But it doesn't matter. I'd rather just hang out with you, anyway."

"Insta-hate? I'd say that's a bit too much," Jonathan said.

"Nope. I think you got yourself an enemy." Ray made a small move with his chin in Maddox's direction.

Jonathan risked a glance. Yeah, the guy looked very much pissed, munching on his lollipop, a deep frown etched between his eyebrows. And he stared at him, with murder written all over his handsome face.

The only thing to do was groan in exasperation. While he didn't need to be friends with a mad dog, the idea of making an enemy so quickly was annoying, to say the least.

## *Chapter Two - Someone Out And Proud*

“Are you even listening to me, JJ?”

It was for the third time that day that he was spacing out. For some unfathomable reason, he kept thinking about the insta-hate thing he had going on with the big man on campus or whatever Ray called Maddox ‘Mad Dawg’ Kingsley. They had almost bumped into each other a few times around the quad ever since the classes started, and each time, Jonathan had felt something like an uncomfortable tension waving off from the other. Almost, because he had made sure to change direction and put as much distance as he could between them, which was ridiculous because it made him seem like a coward, which he usually wasn’t.

He didn’t worry that Maddox might suddenly start a fight. No, his actual problems were closely related to the sudden and overwhelming effect those amazing gray eyes could have on him. He was obviously a sucker for punishment if he couldn’t fend off this type of primal attraction he instantly felt toward that kind of man. After what had happened last year, he should have known better, and yet the moment he saw a typical bad boy, he was up for handing over the leash like a stray puppy looking for an owner.

Quite stubbornly, he had tried not to think of the guy at all. Each time his thoughts strayed there, he tried to convince himself that the resident BMOC was some drug peddler, a gangster, and someone who engaged in underground fights to feed who knew how many addictions, among which women were high on the list.

Maddox Kingsley was everything he didn’t need in his life. What he needed in his life was a nice gay man who was safe and pleasant and could make him forget all about his past ordeals. Definitely not a straight bad boy with an attitude who growled at people instead of talking like a normal person.

“JJ,” Ray called for him, this time a little louder. “What you got next?”

Jonathan consulted his schedule quickly. “Statistics. Are you taking it?”

Ray made a disgusted face. “More math? No, thank you. Hey, do you think we should go to a party this Saturday?”

“It depends. Were we invited?”

Ray made a small gesture like it didn’t matter. “I think we should. And we could, you know, start our search for true love. By the way, I think I have the perfect candidate for you.”

“You do?” Jonathan truly needed a distraction from his insta-hate affair slash forbidden attraction toward the BMOC of Sunny Hill. Great, courtesy of Ray, he was now thinking in acronyms and invented words.

“Connor Williams,” Ray said with self-importance. “He’s a junior, too, and he’s into green energy and eco-friendly stuff. He’s out and proud, just as you like them, and he’s currently single.”

“All right. He sounds like a great person so far.”

“He also likes parties,” Ray added, “which obviously means that we need to go to some, too, just so that you get to bump into him and make his acquaintance.”

“So, all this is just a cunning plan to drag me to some party. I’m afraid I’m not the type to indulge much in beer-infused shenanigans. Is there any other way for me to meet Connor?”

Ray nodded. He was on his phone, probably checking that horrible digital tabloid. After an evening spent being roped into the gossip vortex of Sunny Hill, Jonathan had promised himself that he would never let Ray do that to him ever again. Even after taking a long hot shower, he still felt dirty.

“Ah, that’s perfect. He ‘s taking Statistics, just like you are.”

“Is there something that tabloid doesn’t know?”

Ray shrugged. “I have no idea. I mean, whoever’s behind it, seems to know everything, even about your run in with Mad Dawg.”

Jonathan would have preferred that thing to have remained between him and Maddox, but it looked like the gossip mill had taken that juicy piece of info, chewed it, and vomited it out on computer and phone screens everywhere already.

“We barely exchanged a maximum of ten words,” he said. “Talk about blowing things out of proportion. And I bet that Maddox has already forgotten about it.”

“Hey, it made you semi-famous,” Ray countered.

“In a somewhat bad way,” Jonathan said. “It looks to me like people prefer to stay clear of me. Do they think I got rabies from him or something?”

Ray offered him a compassionate look. “They side with him only because he’s been here longer.”

“Side with him? Nothing happened! Anyway, it’s a good thing that I’m being left alone. I’m certainly not chasing fame. What does Connor look like?”

Ray leaned against him and bumped him with his elbow while wiggling his eyebrows suggestively. “Do you want to know if he’s hot?”

“That is not why I’m asking. I just want to be able to recognize him. There are hundreds of students here if you haven’t noticed.”

“Well, you can thank me later because he is hot,” Ray continued unabashed, “and that’s why he’s my first pick for you.”

“How can you tell a guy is hot, straight boy?” Jonathan teased him.

“My long experience with gay-themed shows must be the culprit. Anyway, I don’t have to describe him to you since he’s over there. That man of the jungle with the flowery shirt. Doesn’t he look fit to start saving the planet?”

Jonathan stared at a group sitting on the grass. Everyone was enraptured with one young man that was talking loudly and gesticulating. He had long blond hair that fell below his shoulders and wore, indeed, a billowy shirt adorned with a colorful flower pattern. He got why Ray was calling him a man of the jungle. At first glance, it looked like his hair needed a comb, and there was something in the way he was pushing his chest out like he was about to launch a loud cry and call all the creatures of the forest. And there was also the beard, a bit of the hippy kind, although it appeared to be quite well-groomed to fit the rest of the young man’s appearance.

He wasn’t sure about the hot part, though, but he didn’t want to rain on Ray’s parade. His bestie was obviously thinking that he was doing him a favor. From that distance, Jonathan couldn’t help thinking that Connor looked a bit like a poser, moving his arms too much, adjusting the wooden bracelets on his wrists too often, and trying too hard to prove a point, although everyone in his group was already listening. As Connor moved his head and looked at strangers, Jonathan could only think he was interested in enlarging his audience.

But he was not supposed to judge people by a first impression. And he truly needed to take his mind off Maddox and his gorgeous eyes, biceps, and everything else. Yes, he had thought about those arms, too, but he was only twenty years old and couldn’t be blamed for having his hormones running wild now and then. The fact that he didn’t find Connor hot at first sight was a good thing. He wasn’t planning on getting into anything hormones-first like before.

“Then I should go listen to his speech. The more I learn about what moves him, the better my chances of making meaningful conversation are from the get-go, right?”

“Go ahead, buddy,” Ray said and patted him on the back. “Gotta run, see you later. And JJ?” He stopped him for a moment and flipped up his thumbs. “You totally got this.”

Jonathan smiled as his bestie scurried away.

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For the last three days, ever since the incident in the cafeteria, Maddox had felt in a funk of sorts. So, everyone liked him, and there was just this one guy who didn’t. It shouldn’t have annoyed

him so much, but it did. He had even let Rusty call dibs on all the new girls on campus until his friend had decreed that it was no longer fun to beat him at that game.

What was even more annoying was how the new transfer avoided him like he had the plague each time they happened to be in the same one hundred square meters. Maddox was starting to suspect that someone must have badmouthed him, especially since the guy's first reaction had been so negative, or else he couldn't see why that kept happening. Also, it appeared that their little exchange hadn't gone unnoticed, and everyone, with almost no exception, had decided that they had to treat the newcomer as a social pariah and to assure him, Maddox, wherever he went, that they were on his side, like there was some big war going on. The fact that he kept denying that was the case didn't help either. Everyone loved him that much.

Except for that dude.

At least, the rumor mill had provided him with some facts for a change. The handsome asshole's name was Jonathan Hamilton, he had transferred here from a school up north, he was majoring in chemistry, he was openly gay (Dex had been right, after all), and that was pretty much it. Jonathan seemed to be a mystery, even to the most versed gossipers on campus. He was also there on an academic scholarship, so he had to be sharp as a tack. But there was nothing about his family and why he was staying at the dorms instead of renting some lavish townhouse and living like a king. Maddox wondered if he had been mistaken in his assumption that the new transfer stank of old money. He usually was good at evaluating people and their wealth bracket. After all, he was majoring in business for a reason.

"I'm going to make that dude like me," he announced to his friends as they strolled through the quad.

Everyone waved or tried to talk to them like usual, but he left all social interactions to Rusty, Kane, and Dex, as he was too absorbed in coming up with a plan to get close to Jonathan Hamilton.

"Are you still salty over that thing? So the dude doesn't like you. Big deal," Rusty said.

"But everyone likes me," Maddox protested. "Why doesn't he?"

Rusty shrugged. Kane seemed keener on explaining. "Maybe he thought you were trying to hit on him."

Maddox met that with a stricken expression. "Really? And what's not to like?" He threw his arms outward to the sides and walked backward in front of his friends, allowing them to take a good look at him.

"Maddox, buddy, you're not into boys," Dex intervened. "Why does it matter if he likes you or not?"

“It’s about my reputation, come on,” Maddox complained. “I mean, just look at me, I’m practically candy for gay boys.”

His tirade was met with a snort from Dex, a chuckle from Kane, and a confused look from Rusty.

“I’ll show you.” He searched with his eyes until they landed on a boy dressed in a rainbow flag t-shirt who was laughing with a group of girls. “Hey, you,” he called.

The boy stared at him in disbelief and pointed at his chest. “Who, me?”

“Yeah. You’re --” Maddox snapped his fingers while trying to recall the student’s name.

“Cletus,” the boy supplied.

“Right. Cletus, you’re into guys, right?”

Cletus just nodded, while the smile on his face turned a bit cautious.

“If I hit on you, what would you do?” Maddox asked directly.

Cletus blinked a few times. The crew behind Maddox started snickering. “How’s it going, Candy?” Dex teased him.

Maddox placed himself between Cletus and his buddies. “Ignore these assholes. Please, just tell me. It’s for a project, I’m running some statistics,” he added quickly, as he understood why the boy looked so intimidated now. “I’m not actually hitting on you.”

“Well, I guess I’d be flattered?” Cletus said and offered a forced smile.

Maddox groaned. “Seriously? You don’t think I’m hot?” His friends just started to laugh harder.

Cletus shifted nervously from one foot to another. “You are, but I’d totally think you were pulling a prank on me.”

“What if I wasn’t? You know I totally respect gay people, right?” Maddox was starting to feel a little queasy. Was someone starting some nasty rumors about him? Although that was a good explanation for why Jonathan avoided him everywhere, it made him mad that someone would be spreading that kind of false information.

“Yeah, I know,” Cletus said, and some of his nervousness began to disappear while his good-natured smile returned. “So it wouldn’t be a prank?”

“Surely not. It would be the real thing.”

Cletus shrugged and grinned. He gave Maddox a long and suggestive once-over while biting his lips. “Then I’d say, bring it on, baby.” He then stopped and blushed a little as it was his crew’s turn to burst into laughter.

“Thank you, buddy, that was really helpful,” Maddox said and then turned to his besties. “I’m this close to unfriending you all, fuckers.”

Dex patted him on the back, hard enough to make him take an involuntary extra step. “So, Candy, gay boys want you. What does that prove?”

“Why doesn’t Jonathan Hamilton?” Maddox asked the obvious question.

“Maybe because he’s got his eyes on a different prize,” Kane said and pointed somewhere in front.

Maddox narrowed his eyes when he noticed what Kane was talking about. Jonathan was there, and he was engaged in conversation with that tree hugger Connor. Something about that dude had always irked Maddox, maybe the way he tried too hard with his speech on protecting the environment. It seemed as if it was the only thing he could talk about, and there was something shifty in his eyes that he disliked profoundly.

His sour mood only turned sourer as he observed how Jonathan kept angling his torso, his body language clearly indicating that he was interested in his conversation partner. At the same time, Connor stood with his arms crossed and slightly defensive like he could barely wait to get out of there. Well, the interest was one-sided, and that gave Maddox a slight feeling of satisfaction. Not that he could understand how Jonathan could be interested in that greasy monkey and not in him, but that was something he would work on.

“See you later, guys,” he waved at his friends and walked purposefully toward Jonathan and Connor. “Hi, man,” he greeted Connor, who immediately turned toward him, seeming relieved to be saved from having to talk to his current companion. “How’s it hanging?”

As Connor did his signature handshake and hug, Maddox looked over his shoulder at Jonathan. He was staring at him, and a frown was quickly forming on his face. *Yeah, take that; how do you like being the guy who isn’t liked?*

“Heading to Statistics,” Connor replied. “You too?”

“Sure.”

Maddox noticed Jonathan hesitate slightly. What was that about? Connor grabbed Maddox by the shoulders and made him walk toward the building where the lecture would take place, all the while ignoring Jonathan, which was pretty rude and should have given him satisfaction but didn’t. Jonathan stayed behind, his face clouded and turned away. Maddox noticed that because he looked at him over his shoulder.

“What’s with you and the new guy?” Maddox asked.

“Nothing,” Connor said quickly. “Can you believe that he just tried to lecture me on nuclear power?” He tsked like Jonathan must have said some dim-witted things.

Maddox continued to sneak glances backward until he noticed Jonathan moving and heading, surprise, surprise, in the same direction. Was he stalking Connor? That was so embarrassing. The dude should have taken the hint by now. Unless, of course --

“Is Jonathan in Statistics, too?” he asked.

“Who?” Connor said like he hadn’t spoken to him only seconds ago.

Maddox didn’t insist. If they all had the same class, he could see it happening, so he came up with an excuse to saunter off and headed over to the lecture hall faster.

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Jonathan felt a bit stunned. He was being ostracized, all because of that ridiculous run-in with Maddox. Connor had spoken to him in monosyllables and then stormed off with Maddox like he wasn’t even there. He pinched the bridge of his nose and willed himself to relax. How had he managed to screw up things so badly from the first day?

Was Maddox enough of a scumbag to tell everyone to stay away from him? He had thought it a bit amusing at first since everyone was a stranger, but now he found himself in the impossible position of not being able to strike up a normal conversation with someone he was interested in getting to know.

He heaved a long sigh. As much as he disliked it, he had to address the issue head-on with Maddox. It was true that he had assumed wrongly that Maddox was some sort of drug peddler, but using his influence to shut him out entirely from campus social life? That was taking things a bit too far.

Good thing he had Ray. At least for now, his bestie was immune to the charms of the legendary Mad Dawg. He was probably called that because he could sentence any student to social death with a snap of the fingers like an insane emperor from Ancient Rome.

He walked into the lecture hall, his head wrapped in thoughts. As he crashed into another hard body, he looked up. “I’m so sorry,” he said automatically but swallowed his words when he noticed who had inconveniently placed himself in the way. His lips clamped shut.

Maddox examined him with curiosity. He was giving him a lazy once-over like he was licking him from head to toes. Jonathan shuddered under that gaze for reasons he didn’t care to explore. “No problem,” he said and finally moved away to allow Jonathan entrance.

He moved quickly past Maddox and searched for a place in the back. The last thing he needed was to have everyone's eyes on him. Most probably, those gossip-hungry students could barely wait for the next episode in the New Guy vs. BMOC war.

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Maddox watched as Jonathan found a place in the last row away from everyone. His face was all a frown, but his hands were steady as he took out his laptop and placed it on the desk. At this point, a total noob in the art of getting someone to like you would have walked over and asked to sit by the guy's side, but Maddox was no noob. He was plenty more refined than that.

Of course, it was a bit of a let-down that he wouldn't get to look at Jonathan at all during the lecture, as he always sat in the front row, but it didn't bother him much. Also, he wanted his little surprise to catch Jonathan completely unawares at the end of the lecture.

He exchanged a few words with the students around him while the professor waited for everyone to be seated. One last look couldn't hurt. Jonathan was a pleasure to look at, Maddox had to admit. Only earlier, when they had bumped into each other, he had had the chance to smell his subtle, yet highly exclusive, cologne. For any gay guy, Jonathan had to be sex on a stick, not that Maddox knew anything about that, but he was a keen observer. And his observations had led him to notice the broad shoulders, lean waist, pretty eyes, and of course, that perfect ass. Maddox sneaked another glance at the last row.

Jonathan had his forehead resting against his palm, shielding his face from view like he wanted to be anywhere else but there. Maddox frowned. Wasn't he a bit too sensitive? So, yeah, the entire student body was kind of a bunch of douchebags for shunning him, but no one had done anything overtly hostile, as far as Maddox knew. Why did he have to look so down?

Well, things would change for Jonathan Hamilton starting today, Maddox decided. Because once they became friends, everyone would love him, and that was that.

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Jonathan had a hard time focusing on the class and taking notes, as he couldn't ignore the proportions of his inane conflict with Maddox. Mad Dawg clearly looked like he owned the place, and everyone was bending over backward to be in his good graces.

He hated to do it, but he needed to apologize. It wasn't because he wanted all that ostracism of his person to cease, he tried to convince himself, but because he had been in the wrong to assume that Maddox was some drug dealer. As much as he needed to control his inexplicable attraction, it didn't mean that it allowed him to go around accusing people of such horrible things.

Inexplicable attraction? It was hard to keep up with that after throwing the quickest of looks at the front row. Jonathan found his eyes drawn to the place where Maddox sat. He wore his hair

cut close to the head at the back but let it grow long on top, which allowed him to look at the world through a jet black curtain that fell in his eyes and made him look so sexy and mysterious. Without a doubt, he knew very well what he was doing with that act. He had the small world of Sunny Hill wrapped around his little finger, and Jonathan struggled to find it in him to hate him.

Their little bump-in from earlier had just lit a new fire under his ass, he pondered dejectedly. He had had the chance not only to look into those gorgeous gray eyes from much closer but also to notice how nice Maddox smelled. Yeah, that was the last thing he needed.

“And now I will announce the project pairings for this semester. As some of you already know, I prefer that you don’t change your partner unless you have a really good reason,” the professor said.

Jonathan straightened up and listened attentively. If there happened to be an odd number of students attending the course, he had the highest chances of being the odd man out, and he was fine with it. But he still needed to apologize to Maddox and maybe mend some of his catastrophic debut. As soon as the professor was done calling their names for the pairings, he would have to move fast and catch Maddox before he walked out of the lecture hall.

“Mr. Kingsley,” the professor said loudly, “you’ll be with Mr. Hamilton.” She looked over the hall, and Jonathan put one hand up while his heart first slowed down and then began hammering in his chest. What were the odds of that happening?

Maddox appeared to be crazily pleased as he turned and grinned at him. He even waved, and Jonathan waved back after a second’s hesitation. What was that about now? Had Maddox thought of some new way to haze him? It had to be as that satisfied smirk, visible even across the several rows between them, couldn’t portend anything good.

Jonathan repressed a groan. Chances were that Maddox would have him do all the work on the project as payment for not kneeling in front of him and kissing his pinky ring the moment they had met for the first time.

He bit his bottom lip hard. The last, but truly the last, thing he needed was to picture himself kneeling in front of Maddox Kingsley. And he truly needed to take care of his raging hormones if only imagining such a thing was enough to get him going.

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Maddox leaned against the desk and stretched his legs as the students hurried out. Now, Jonathan would have to talk to him since they had to partner for their project. And that was his chance to clear the air and make him like him, just like the rest of the universe.

He didn't move a muscle as Jonathan walked in front of him and stopped. His handsome face looked conflicted, and Maddox tensed without wanting to, expecting some other weird accusations to leave that perfect mouth.

"Maddox, I must apologize." Jonathan looked away, clearly uncomfortable.

Maddox's grin stretched lazily. Now that was unexpected. Jonathan Hamilton looked like the kind of dude who didn't say those words easily, not when it was about serious stuff, at least. And by the expression in those beautiful amber eyes that finally settled on him, this was serious.

"What for?" Maddox asked. "You're not backing out on partnering for the project, right?" That would be a total bummer.

Jonathan's frown deepened. "No, I wasn't talking about that. I was referring to our little incident from a few days ago. I shouldn't have assumed you were trying to sell me drugs."

Maddox munched on his lips, trying hard not to laugh.

"What is so amusing?" Jonathan asked.

"Nothing, nothing," Maddox replied and sighed, finally capable of reining in the laughter bubbling in his chest. "Apologies accepted. No harm done."

"All right," Jonathan replied.

The words rolled out of his mouth like they were gems he bestowed upon the world. Okay, so the dude had kind of a chip on his shoulder, which made things all the more entertaining.

"However, I can only assume that verbal apologies may not be enough," Jonathan continued.

"Uh-um," Maddox said, strangely attracted by his mouth. Jonathan had a nice pair of lips, and as a gay guy, he most probably liked sucking –

He shook his head to chase away that strange image that came to mind uninvited.

"So, to make things right," Jonathan said, clearly oblivious to the effect he had on Maddox by doing nothing but talking, "I'm offering to contribute in a more substantial manner to the project. I mean, if you don't feel like --"

"What?" Maddox finally managed to completely shake off the naughty image in his head. "Don't worry, dude, I'll pull my own weight. I mean it. And I love this course."

"You do?" Jonathan seemed surprised. And then he offered a small smile. "I also enjoy it."

"Great, that's great." Maddox said the words mechanically, incapable of remembering all the teasing he had had in store for Jonathan.

“Excellent. Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot,” Maddox said with a shrug.

Light pink colored the heights of Jonathan’s cheeks. “Do you think you could, maybe, let the rest of the world know that we’re not engaged in some sort of... war?” It appeared that he was struggling to find the right words.

“What war? Ah, oh, yeah, sure. I mean, I kept telling them that it was nothing,” Maddox said.

He tried to look lower, just so that he didn’t have to stare at those sexy lips again. It wasn’t helping, though, since as much as Jonathan’s shirt was as conservative and regular as it could be, it did absolute justice to a nice broad chest and the perfect shape of his pecs.

“Is there something on my shirt?” Jonathan asked, looking at himself in confusion. “You keep staring --”

“You know what, Jonathan? Let’s meet up later to talk about the project.” He pulled out his phone, and Jonathan did the same.

Gosh, there was something weird going on with him and this dude. Maddox was perfectly fine with his sexuality, like totally. And he had never had any qualms with admitting when dudes were fine-looking. Yet, the more he looked at Jonathan Hamilton from up close, the less the images in his head made any sense.

“So, we’ll talk,” Jonathan said and offered another small cautious smile.

Maddox closed his eyes for a moment. That smile was fucking precious, for some reason. What he needed to do right now was to stop ogling that smile, lips, eyes, chest, whatever. So he stood and pulled Jonathan into a hug since that was a sure way not to be forced to keep his eyes open and stare at him anymore.

“Oh,” the other reacted, “are we hugging?”

Maddox nodded and held him close, wrapping one hand around the back of his neck. “That’s what I do with all my buddies.”

Yes, he did, but he’d never done it just so that he didn’t have to stare at their faces and have weird ass fantasies. Jonathan touched him gently on the back and patted him with cautious hesitation. That felt nice.

A bit too nice. He could totally smell the expensive cologne, and Jonathan really did smell fantastic. And his body was warm and perfect, all lean angles and hard surfaces, as Maddox could clearly feel through his t-shirt.

Jonathan broke the hug quickly. “Guess I’ll see you around, then,” he said and pushed himself back, almost at the same time as Maddox.

“Yeah, sure, I have a thing,” Maddox mumbled and rubbed the back of his neck. “I should go.”

They almost bumped into one another again on the way out, and Jonathan just stepped back and allowed him to run away. In a completely different direction than him.

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Jonathan could only do this much not to break into a sprint. His saving grace was that his dorm was close to the science building. He jumped the stairs two by two and dashed down the hallway.

He was breathing hard as he walked through the door, checked for any signs of Ray throughout the small suite, and proceeded to lock himself in the bathroom. He groaned and leaned against the door. Then he opened his fly and grabbed his raging erection, which, somehow, had managed not to scandalize anyone on his way there.

What was happening with him and this Maddox character? How could his body react so wildly at that sexy boy’s mere presence? And why, oh why, had Maddox decided to hug him out of the blue?

Even now, he could recall with the utmost clarity the way Maddox had wrapped his calloused hand around the back of his neck, rubbing a little and squeezing, while his other hand had rested between his shoulder blades. Or the way he smelled, spicy and clean and masculine, triggering an instant reaction in Jonathan’s loins. Or how he held them so close together, making him so painfully aware of his hard sexy body and heat. Or how his breath against Jonathan’s neck was enough to make him break into a sweat all over.

He wanted to punch himself in the face, but he had no choice for now. Later, he would have to think of ways to develop resistance to Maddox’s incredible charm. For now, he settled for a steady rhythm of his hand as he moved it up and down. It didn’t take him long. He struggled to voice his climax as quietly as possible, but to his ears, his moans and groans were shamelessly loud.

Maddox Kingsley was out of this world, he decided. He had gone to an all-boys school and then an all-boys college, for fuck’s sake. He had seen plenty of guys, attractive guys, amazing guys, sexy as hell guys. And never, not even the young man behind the incident that had kicked his life out of its normal orbit, had anyone made him feel like this.

“I need to get myself a boyfriend,” Jonathan told himself as he washed his hands, trying to feel disgusted with himself and failing.

Yeah, he needed to settle for someone normal and attainable, not sport an erection each time Maddox did as little as breathe in his general direction.

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“Nobody better need the upstairs bathroom for like ten minutes,” Maddox shouted at the others who were gathered in the living room, playing video games, as he rushed through the door of the house he shared with Dex, Kane, and Rusty.

“Are you shitting yourself?” Rusty asked.

Maddox just flipped him the bird and rushed up the stairs. “Fuck,” he exhaled the moment he was inside and pulled out his hard as a rock cock. “Look who’s out and proud,” he murmured as he began to beat his meat.

So, Jonathan smelled fan-freaking-tastic. Maddox was pretty sure he had never met anyone who smelled so good, not even the girls he dated or hooked up with, let alone a dude. And his body was so damned fine, so fine actually that Maddox had wanted nothing else on the spot but to sneak his hands under his shirt and touch him everywhere.

And there was also that crazy fantasy he could now indulge in since he was alone, of Jonathan on his knees with a hard cock - no, not just any cock, but Maddox’s own pride and joy - between his luscious lips, running them up and down, all misty eyes and ready to take a load.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Maddox hissed and slammed one hand against the wall as rope after rope of cum landed in the toilet bowl.

He was totally drained when he finished. “Aren’t you a bit confused?” he scolded his cock before pushing it back into his underwear.

He needed to get laid. One week without getting his rocks off was too much if he was starting to fantasize about dudes sucking his cock. Yeah, he needed to get laid and forget about Jonathan Hamilton and his juicy mouth.

Also, he had to develop some self-control around the new guy. What was he thinking, partnering with him for that project? Maddox almost regretted getting so chummy with Jonathan Hamilton.

Almost.

### *Chapter Three – Here We Go Again*

The small cooktop could barely serve the purpose, but Jonathan decided to try his hand at cooking anyway. After all, boiling some pasta and preparing some sauce that didn't come in a tube or plastic package along with the entire list of preservatives ever created by mankind wasn't that hard as he had discovered ever since he had left home.

"That smells nice," Ray said as he stuck his head in.

"If you're hungry, I'll have everything ready in about five minutes," Jonathan said.

"Awesome." Ray sat at the small table that could accommodate two people at the best of its capabilities. "So, JJ, you have nothing to fess up?"

"Fess up?" Jonathan turned toward his roommate. Ray was eyeing him while twiddling his thumbs, the perfect impersonation of a parent waiting for a naughty child to spill the beans about breaking his grandmother's one-century old porcelain vase. "Like what?"

"Really?" Ray seemed surprised. "Did I have to find out from Xpress that you got paired with Maddox freaking Kingsley for your Statistics project?"

Jonathan groaned. "That little publication is starting to scare me. Why is such a thing important? Does it list who everyone else is partnering with?"

"Just the important people," Ray said with a shrug. "When were you going to tell me?"

"Ray, Maddox is just a student like everyone else. And we happen to share a class, hence the possibility of us ending up as project partners, with a probability of --"

Ray put his hand up. "I'm going to stop you right there before you launch into some math dissertation that will make me doze off. So, did you talk to him?"

"Briefly," Jonathan said and pretended that the sauce needed some vigorous stirring.

"Well, did he say anything about why he chose you?"

Jonathan turned toward Ray again. "What do you mean? The professor made all the pairings."

Ray smiled slyly. "Not according to Xpress. Apparently, a certain student had a little chat with your prof right before the lecture, insisting that he must be paired up with the new guy."

"Stop reading that thing, Ray, I mean it. I doubt that happened." Jonathan placed two plates on the table. When he went for the forks, his right hand did a weird thing, and the utensils ended up on the floor with a loud clatter.

“Something happened with you two, and you’re not telling,” Ray accused him openly, but in the same playful manner.

“What could possibly have happened? We barely met. All right, since you insist so much. I talked to him, I apologized for mistaking him for a drug dealer, and we hugged.”

He hadn’t intended to let that little tidbit drop, but he couldn’t take it back now.

“O.M.G, JJ, that’s awesome! So you’re friends with him now?”

“I wouldn’t say that. But we’re no longer on the brink of nuclear war,” Jonathan replied.

That is, if he didn’t count what took place south of his belt whenever he happened to be within ten feet of Maddox Kingsley.

“Oh, oh, oh,” Ray continued to express his excitement, slapping his cheeks and grinning broadly, “that means that we’re going to get invited to all the parties. Hooray for us and goodbye, social exclusion!”

“I had no idea you disliked it that much,” Jonathan teased him. “I’d say being invisible to the social body is not entirely a bad thing.”

“Yeah, easy to say when you’re a six point four foot hunk dressed in tailored clothes and looking like a classic movie star,” Ray said without breathing for a moment.

“Aw, you really mean that?” Jonathan joked and fluttered his eyelashes in a coy gesture.

“You know I’m right. I suppose you could do with a little less attention, well, provided that you don’t declare war on the BMOC on your first day of school, but I take whatever crumbs I can get, thank you very much. Hey, I hope you’re not going to ditch me now you’re popular?”

Jonathan laughed and tousled Ray’s hair. “Like I’d do that. You’re my bestie, right?”

Well, he didn’t have to believe everything Ray was reading online in that tabloid, but it did make him wonder. Had Maddox done that? And if ‘yes’, why?

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“What are you up to?” Dex asked and nudged him with his elbow as Maddox fiddled with his phone.

“Huh?”

“Don’t ‘huh’ me. You’ve been doing nothing but look at your phone for the last half hour since I got home. You haven’t said a word.”

“Totally true,” Kane piped in. “And you didn’t even eat your tacos,” he added, pointing at the untouched meal in front of him.

“Yeah, can I have those?” Rusty reached for the plate, and Maddox slapped his hand away promptly.

“No, you can’t. And I was just checking... the weather,” he said defensively.

“The weather,” Dex said slowly.

Maddox stared at his friends, one by one. There were certain glances exchanged between Kane and Dex he didn’t like. Rusty didn’t appear affected, but when was he ever?

“All right,” Kane said, narrowing his eyes. “Who is she?”

“There is no ‘she’,” Maddox replied.

“Yeah, sure.” Kane continued to examine him with shrewd eyes. “She must be giving you the cold shoulder if you’re so distracted.”

“Hey, nobody gives the cold shoulder to my bro,” Rusty jumped to his defense right away.

“Yeah, thank you, Rusty. Here, have a taco.” He threw a small wrap at his friend, who caught it deftly. “I’m not distracted, but very much focused,” Maddox added and waved his phone.

Dex was quick to snatch it from his hand. “Let’s find out what you’re so focused on.”

The ping of an incoming message, supposedly the one he had been waiting for all day long, spurred him into instant action. He lunged at Dex so fast that not even his athletic friend had a chance to prevent him from snatching his phone back. In the blink of an eye, when he saw the sender, he cradled his phone to his chest like it was a matter of national security and darted out of the room.

“Hey, what the hell, man? Who’s your sweetheart?” Dex called after him.

“Let him be. He’ll fess up sooner or later,” Kane said loud enough for him to hear even as he rushed up the stairs to his bedroom.

He made sure to lock the door and pressed his back against it. Then, after one deep breath, he checked the message.

*When is a good time for you to meet up and talk about the project?*

Maddox smiled. For the entire day, he had waited for Jonathan to contact him. In the short message, he could practically hear the correct pronunciation of each word, the rich vowels, the ups and downs of that low pleasant voice. He couldn’t be the one to make the first move,

especially after locking himself in the bathroom and doing the unthinkable while thinking of the guy. He was locking himself in the bedroom now, which surely looked mighty suspicious to his friends downstairs, but, at the moment, he couldn't give a damn about that.

What he did give a damn about was for Jonathan to be the first to contact him. Wait, why was he so excited? Maddox shook his head. Well, whatever happened earlier had to be a fluke. Now that he had jerked off and his balls were dried out, for the time being anyway, he could see the guy without having any unusual fantasies. And since he was a man of action, he had to check that theory sooner rather than later. Meeting up with Jonathan and spending time with the guy would make things perfectly clear, meaning that he was a straight guy who had just had a gay fantasy by accident.

*Are you free right now? Let's meet at the library.*

He hit 'send' and waited. Who knew seconds could feel so long. Why was Jonathan typing so slowly?

*I'll be there in ten. But I must warn you that I won't be able to spend more than an hour on this today.*

Maddox pondered and rubbed his chin in thought.

*Got a date or something?*

Who could snatch Jonathan up so quickly? Yeah, they were no longer at war, as everyone must have heard by now, but really, who could be so fast to catch the guy?

*No, I'm working.*

Phew, not a date. Wait a minute, working?

*You're working?*

Why did the guy have to work? He was there on an academic scholarship and looked like some couple of one-percenters' offspring.

*Yes.*

Maddox waited for a follow-up on that, but it looked like none was coming.

*Why? He sent the message quickly.*

*For the same reason everybody does. Money.*

Maddox scratched his head.

*You seem surprised, or is that just my impression?* A second text from Jonathan followed.

*Yeah. I mean, you reek of old money.*

All right, maybe he had worded that kind of weirdly, but it was precisely what he was thinking, and he usually said whatever crossed his mind.

*I see. Are you at the library yet? I'm on my way, and I don't have that much time to spare.*

Maddox straightened up and then took a quick look at his clothes. They'd do. It wasn't like he was going on a date or something. And phone text Jonathan seemed pricklier than in real life. He sighed in contentment. Yeah, today must have been a fluke. This guy who didn't want to chat outside of whatever they needed to talk about was kind of obnoxious. Maddox grabbed his laptop bag and walked out of the room.

"Where are you going?" Kane questioned him as soon as he was in his friends' line of sight.

"To the library," Maddox quipped. "Working on a project."

There was another meaningful exchange between Kane and Dex.

"Tell her we'd like to meet her," Dex teased him with a crooked grin.

"Geesh, guys, just drop it. There's no girl involved. I'm really going to the library."

He didn't wait for more teasing to happen and walked out the door. Well, after checking that his temporary attraction slash insanity involving Jonathan Hamilton was nothing but a fluke, he would get himself a girl. To be back in action was just what he needed, after all.

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Jonathan perused the case studies spread in front of him while consulting extra data on his laptop. Maddox sat across from him, looking just as distracting as always, which practically meant good enough to kiss and devour slowly one inch of his over six feet in height at a time. To focus on hard cold numbers was the best therapy. He had decided to text Maddox quickly since he clearly needed some exposure to the subject of his maddening attraction just so that he could deal with it better and faster.

So far, it hadn't worked that great, but he was making his best effort. Each time Maddox's eyes lingered on him, he could sense a slight tremor in his fingers, like right now. To steady them for the moment, he searched for his glasses. He wore them only while studying for long hours, and since there was a bit of ground to cover to decide on the best course for their project, he could use them.

Also, they could serve as armor between him and the perfect male beauty across from him—a flimsy piece of armor, but still.

"I didn't know you wore glasses," Maddox said.

Was it just his imagination, or had those words been said in a ragged whisper? The problem with Maddox was that he exuded sex. He could probably make sneezing sexy or something crazy like that.

Jonathan shook his head. How many times did he need to masturbate to get over this senseless crush? Obviously, as rational as he wished to be, his body seemed to have taken on a life of its own, doing whatever it pleased.

“Yes, I wear glasses. And there are many things you don’t know about me since we’ve barely met.”

“Right,” Maddox admitted. “Hey, where did you go to school before coming here?”

Jonathan threw the other a look that he hoped was chilling enough to prevent any further conversation. “We’re here to talk about the project, not me. Here, take a look at these.” He turned his laptop toward his project partner.

Maddox frowned for a moment, but then his attention turned to the screen. He began talking, offering his insights, and Jonathan fell quiet. Clearly, the Mad Dawg of Sunny Hill was more than met the eye. Everything he said made perfect sense, but Jonathan had to pretend to look at the books open on their table to avoid getting blindsided again.

Watching Maddox from up close was bad, truly bad for his nerves. How was he going to survive his junior year?

“Well, we laid the groundwork for it, so I think we’ll do well,” he concluded one hour later, as Maddox stood up and hiked his bag over his shoulder.

Jonathan winced internally at those rolled-up sleeves. The only saving grace was that Maddox really had amazing arms. But it would be poor taste to make a comment on that, given that they were barely acquaintances.

“Yeah. Good work, man.” Maddox smiled and gave him a thumbs up. “Don’t you have to get to work? I could drive you there, wherever it is.”

“No need. I work here, at the library.” Jonathan consulted his wristwatch. “I start in about ten minutes. Don’t worry about these,” he pointed at all the materials on the table. “I’ll return them. And thank you for your offer.”

“Yeah, sure.” Maddox dragged his feet a little like he didn’t want to leave just yet.

Jonathan stared at him for a moment. “Well, it’s been a pleasure,” he said perfunctorily. “See you in Statistics, right? Hey, can I ask you a question?”

The gray eyes lit up with new interest. “Sure.”

“There is this weird rumor that you asked that you be paired with me for this,” Jonathan said, proud of his unwavering voice.

A lopsided grin was the immediate reply. “So what if I did?”

Jonathan opened his mouth and closed it. He should have asked ‘why’, but his courage was apparently only taking him this far and no farther.

Maddox moved away, the same mysterious and unnerving smile on his face. He threw Jonathan a few looks over his shoulder on his way out.

And Jonathan stood there, absolutely nonplussed. First of all, this exposure therapy had proven useless so far. His attraction toward the resident bad boy was just as strong as before, if not made worse. Throughout the last hour, he had been able to observe numerous other details about Maddox, such as how he had the curliest and darkest eyelashes he had ever seen in his life or how his hands must be so calloused from lifting weights or something like that – which probably came in handy given his strange choice of extra-curricular activities - , or how the corners of his mouth curled and brought the cutest dimples into existence whenever he smiled, something he often did.

Those weren’t the only details he had noticed, of course, but he needed to stop for the sake of his sanity. The second reason for his current state of perplexity was how smart Maddox truly was. Why would a guy like that get into illegal fights, something that had clearly earned him that idiotic nickname? He obviously had the smarts to be a top student.

He started to gather all the books, more and more aggravated by his lack of common sense when it came to hot young men like Maddox. No, this wouldn’t be a case of history repeating, he told himself. One time was an accident. Two times, well, that would be a habit.

A really bad habit.

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Maddox dropped onto the sofa and groaned in absolute disappointment with himself. Well, that had gone completely wrong. He had barely managed to keep his head in the game, as Jonathan had calmly and relentlessly thrown heaps of information at him.

Rusty came into the room. “Back so soon from your date?”

Unlike Kane and Dex, who liked to tease him, Rusty actually meant the question as he meant everything else he ever said.

“I wasn’t on a date,” Maddox said. “Did those two clowns really assume that?”

Rusty shrugged and sat by his side. “They seem sure you have a crush or something. They’re taking bets.”

“On who I’m crushing on?”

“They use the scientific method. The first bet is on what year she is in.”

“Ah, I see.” Maddox wasn’t surprised. It was the unwritten rule that whoever had a crush had to be teased by the others. Kane, the asshole, had it good since he already had a steady girlfriend. The others were fair game. “Hey, listen, have you ever imagined what it would be like to come on someone’s glasses?”

Rusty considered the question with a thoughtful frown on his face. “Sunglasses or prescription?”

“Prescription,” Maddox replied.

“Do they have light sensitive lenses or clear?”

He failed to see how that was important, but he was the one who needed to find an answer to this pressing question. “Clear, I suppose.”

With rimless design and a platinum finish frame, but he didn’t add that.

“Are they on the person wearing them or would you like to come on them if they were like on a table or something?” Rusty continued his inquiry.

“Seriously? Why are you asking so many questions?”

“When it comes to kinks, you gotta be specific,” Rusty explained. “Otherwise, you might end up ordering the wrong thing from the sex shop, and then having to come up with an explanation when your parents stumble over a pair of twelve-inch heels at the back of your closet.”

That sounded like something that could happen to Rusty. He had a thing for costume play, and more than once his very transitory girlfriends had been seen leaving his bedroom in the strangest getups possible.

“How did that happen?” he asked.

Rusty shrugged. “They weren’t her size. Even legends have their bad days.”

Maddox couldn’t agree more, given his current situation and very distracting thoughts involving a particular new transfer to their college.

“So?” Rusty asked, still waiting for an answer.

“Okay, on the person wearing them,” Maddox replied. And that person was wearing them in style like he was born to star in ads for the latest optical fashions.

“Well, no.”

“What?”

“You asked me if I ever imagined that, so I’m giving you the answer,” Rusty replied promptly.

Maddox patted his friend on the back. “Thanks, buddy, you’ve been a great help.”

“Anytime, man.”

Yeah, what he liked about Rusty was how the guy never pestered him like the other two fools. Even right now, when Maddox practically served him a thousand reasons to tease him relentlessly on a silver platter, Rusty didn’t take the bait and instead behaved like a bona fide friend.

However, that didn’t solve his problem. “I’m heading upstairs for a shower. Wanna go out for drinks later?”

“Sure,” Rusty said with a shrug.

“Really? After calling dibs on half the campus, you still don’t have a date?”

“I need to make a comparison chart first and choose accordingly.”

That sounded like Rusty, too.

Maddox was fast to climb the stairs, shed all his clothes, and head for the shower. He let the water pour over his head and body, hoping for a little bit of a reprieve after all the sensory assault from earlier. Yeah, he totally wanted to come all over those glasses, now that he had seen them. And yes, he wanted them to be attached to the person, while the guy knelt in front of him and blinked lazily and waited for him to shoot.

Maddox grabbed his cock and pulled back the skin. For a couple of moments, he stared at his former best friend as he held it by the root and watched the head pulse and get ready for action.

“Here we go again,” he said with a sigh and began.

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Could one be philosophical about things like baffling attraction? Jonathan laid in bed, his eyes on the ceiling, hands behind his head. After another mind-blowing and exhausting session of masturbation, he was supposed to be perfectly ready to sleep, but none of that happened. As soon as he closed his eyes, that mischievous smile and those gorgeous gray eyes jumped at him as if they could barely wait for him to drop his guard.

“He’s straight,” he said. Maybe if he heard the words out loud, they would make sense, and he would finally be able to get over it.

He wasn’t only straight. According to the gossip mill, he was a ladies’ man, and no one had ever heard of him doing anything close to experimenting with a walk on the wild side. He clearly had no qualms about gay people, as Jonathan had learned from Ray, and he was just the type of guy who seemed to be comfortable in his own skin and sexuality.

What he needed to do was to focus on someone else. He could think about Connor, although the guy didn’t seem interested in him at all. But Connor was gay, out and proud, and, at least in theory, a viable option.

Jonathan brushed his cock with his hand tentatively. How would it feel to kiss Connor? He had kind of thin lips, unlike Maddox, who had truly sensuous lips, especially when he licked a lollipop, although realistically, he had only ever seen him do that once, that first time –

His cock stirred. Jonathan slapped it in frustration. He couldn’t just keep going there. It was bad for him, just like sugar was bad for one’s weight, and fried foods for one’s arteries, and smoking for one’s lungs...

Yeah, he tried to convince himself. Dreaming like that about Maddox was unhealthy. This weekend, he would adopt Ray’s idea of attending some party. Preferably one with no specifics like whether the people happening by were invited or not. He didn’t dare to think that the all-campus ban on his person was lifted permanently, as well as far and wide.

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“So, we’re on for the party at Larson this Saturday, right?” Dex asked them all.

“Sure thing,” Maddox replied with fake enthusiasm.

Except for sleeping, and sometimes not even that, he had thought of anything and anyone else but Jonathan very little. How could he call himself a straight guy anymore with all those gay fantasies hijacking his thoughts? So far, he had imagined the guy sucking his cock at least three times and then coming over various parts of his body several times more. He had drawn the line at trying to picture that perky ass without clothes and his dick gliding between the tight cheeks while he pressed them together to increase the imaginary friction.

Good thing no one suspected what kept happening inside his head. This party, the first this semester, was going to help. He hadn’t seen Jonathan at all, except from a distance. Unlike before, the guy had waved to him in recognition, but he hadn’t gone out of his way to come and greet him properly or talk to him.

Which was completely fine with Maddox. They were, after all, nothing but acquaintances, so what did they have to talk about, anyway? It kind of pissed him off that now no one thought the

two of them were at war anymore, Jonathan seemed to strike up conversations all over the place, with a large number of people. Wasn't it better when he was a social pariah and no one wanted to talk to him?

Better for who? Well, Maddox didn't take kindly to judgmental little voices telling him to pay attention to what was right or wrong.

He would find a girl at this party, someone easy and up for fun, and he would get his rocks off so good that he would forget all about Jonathan Hamilton, his gorgeous face, his sexy body, and everything else.

Like that small precious smile.

Or pretty eyes.

Or his prickly personality.

Oh, yeah, he was that level of fucked up. Even that turned him on.

#### *Chapter Four – Jonathan Hamilton Is (Not) An Easy Lay*

“I’m so freaking excited.” Ray bounced up and down as they joined the other students pouring like a stream toward the same destination. “Man, you look amazing,” he commended Jonathan.

After some deliberation and many of Ray’s exclamations regarding his wardrobe, Jonathan had settled for a burgundy shirt and charcoal grey pants. After Ray had asked him at least a thousand times if he didn’t think that was too formal for a college party, he had acquiesced to leaving a couple of buttons open and rolling his sleeves up to his elbows, his concession to his roommate’s insistence that he should let go a little.

It was true that he did look a bit out of place among the other young men and women who had mostly opted for jeans and short skirts, but Jonathan had no intention of pretending he was someone else. Not this year, and not ever again.

“So many pretty girls,” Ray said and swooned exaggeratedly. Then he grabbed Jonathan by the arm and leaned against him. “Should we do that guessing game?”

“I hate to break it to you, buddy, but everyone is well aware now that I’m gay,” Jonathan said in an apologetic voice.

“It wasn’t me who told anybody,” Ray replied.

“I know. And don’t you worry. I never had the intention of keeping it a secret. This way, I can openly pursue someone without leaving room for misinterpretations.”

“We could still ask them if they think I’m gay or not, but I don’t think it will have the same impact,” Ray said mournfully.

“I’m afraid I’m not as good a wingman as you imagined I would be,” Jonathan offered.

“I heard Connor is going to be here,” Ray said in a conspiratorial voice.

Everyone appeared to be there, so that wasn’t news, but he didn’t want to deter Ray from his desire to help him. The problem was that he hadn’t thought of Connor almost at all, although he had wished to do so with every cell in his body. Unfortunately for him, his body quite often kept remembering another student attending Sunny Hill, who was everything Connor wasn’t.

Straight.

Unavailable.

And hot.

Jonathan hated himself in the extreme for being so superficial. He needed to grab the reins and do the right thing. Even if he didn’t care for Connor, he would at least talk to him if he were

there at the party. Anything was better than having wide-eyed – and close-eyed – dreams about Maddox and his perfect body. The guy was muscular but not in a heavy way like his friend Dex, and the way he moved was proof enough that he knew how to use his body, and by that, yes, Jonathan meant using it inside the bedroom, between the sheets, with someone under or on top of him.

“That’s good to know,” he told Ray. “I’ll try talking to him, see if we could start over, this time on the right foot.”

“Wait, do you mean you got into a fight with Connor, too?”

Jonathan hadn’t had the heart to tell his roommate that Connor had proven quite unsociable toward him before the peace was declared between him and Maddox. “No, nothing of the kind, but we had a very short conversation which didn’t give us the chance to get to know each other.”

“Well, once we’re in there, if you see him, you don’t have to mind me. Go talk to him. I’ll be fine on my own.”

Jonathan didn’t feel enthusiastic in the least about the prospect, but he needed to deal with his absurd fascination with the ultimate catch on campus. Maddox was out of reach, and since Jonathan wasn’t female, he had absolutely no chance with the guy.

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Besides being an ass man, Maddox had never been particularly pretentious about the girls he kept hooking up with. Relationships and dating, he had done too little of that to matter. Therefore, his constant, no matter how polite, refusal to strike up conversations with people of the opposite sex, conversations that could lead to some heated action in one of the rooms upstairs, was starting to make him grow weary. The girls who knew him not to be so fickle were getting bored quickly with him and moving on to other guys, which didn’t bother him at all.

Before the party died down, he needed to decide on one of the many pretty girls who stole glances at him in the hope that they would be noticed, or else, he had moved his ass to this party for nothing.

The whole point was to get laid with someone who didn’t care about strings attached and all that. Someone easy and fun who could make him forget about a particular pair of amber eyes. Yeah, he had ended up so low that it was enough to think of the guy’s eyes, and he was getting a boner.

He was leaning against the wall, sipping from his rum and coke, while examining everyone who came inside. His friends were already mingling, and after teasing him a little about waiting for his chosen one, they had left him to his musings. While Kane was there to hang out with his

lacrosse buddies most of all, Dex and Rusty had already found some girls to have fun with, and they were nowhere in sight.

Heads began turning, and people started whispering, so Maddox craned his neck to see what the commotion was all about. He bit back a curse when he saw who the new star making an entrance right now was. Jonathan looked perfect, in a shirt the color of dark wine or something like that, which he wore casually, letting slightly sinewy forearms and a bit of chest show. Someone was hanging from his arm, and Jonathan was leaning toward that person, laughing in a carefree manner, his eyes all twinkling.

Maddox made an extra effort to see who that was. His eyebrows shot up when he noticed that boy who was always with Jonathan around the campus. What was his name? Ah, Ray... something. He had quickly learned that the boy was Jonathan's roommate, but as much as Maddox kept racking his brain, he couldn't recall if there had been any mentions of him being gay or not. Were they together? Jonathan certainly seemed to be enjoying himself. Now that was a letdown.

Well, why the hell was it a letdown? For all he knew, Jonathan could have a boyfriend or more. Or he could play the field, seeing how that day, he had unsuccessfully tried to get with Connor, who was also openly gay.

The thing was, he knew nothing about the guy. During their project get-together, they had only talked about what they would do for it, and nothing personal. Jonathan's private life seemed to have tighter security than Fort Knox, and the most experienced gossipers on campus had so far come up with nothing, no matter how all perked up his ears had been to catch the slightest whiff of information on the topic.

But a guy like that had to get his rocks off somehow, right? That tall, lean and muscular body had to know all the steps of the horizontal cha-cha, and now that he looked at him more closely, Maddox was pretty sure he would be great as a top, too. Still, he stuck to his prediction that Jonathan was at least versatile because there was no way gay dudes getting it on with him could ignore that fantastic view from behind.

Maddox examined Jonathan's companion with a critical eye as Ray went to get some cups for the two of them. Was that what made the new star on campus tick? Well, if he stared long enough, maybe, just maybe, Ray what-was-his-last-name had a somewhat twinkish charm. Nah, Maddox shook his head. He was just too plain, no charm whatsoever.

But Jonathan's face lit up again when Ray handed him a cup, and their heads moved closer as they talked like there was no one else in the world. Maddox pursed his lips and turned on his heel. There was no point in watching Jonathan Hamilton's love life being played out in front of him while he sat there thinking of masturbating to him for the umpteenth time since they met. On

his way towards the main room, he casually linked arms with a cute blonde girl who beamed at him in an instant.

*See? Things could be simple, he told himself. Only if you want them to be.*

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Except for Ray, Jonathan didn't know anyone well enough to do any actual hanging out, although many people stopped by their side to greet them and exchange a few words. He hadn't realized he was unconsciously looking for a certain someone until he noticed his retreating back, as well as his right arm wrapped around a back on which lovely blonde curls bounced. So, Maddox was present, and he was already having fun.

Jonathan stared into his cup for a moment. He could always leave the drink somewhere and pretend he had drunk it, but being part of college life meant that he needed to adapt, as horrendous as the taste of that beverage was. With newfound courage, he took another sip and decided that maybe he could find a strategic moment to throw the dubious liquid away as discreetly as possible.

"Hey, Jonathan," someone called to him.

To be completely honest, he was surprised to see Connor making his way through the throng of people to get to him. Ray squeezed his shoulder quickly. "I'm off to make friends with some other nerds like me. Have fun, JJ."

Jonathan wished Ray would have stuck around some more, but soon he was face-to-face with Connor, so he smiled politely. "Hey, Connor," he replied.

"Having fun?" the guy asked him with a sly smile and pointed at his cup.

"Trying," Jonathan offered.

"What?" Connor cupped his ear, a sign that he could barely hear him over the loud music.

"I said --" He decided to forget about trying to have a conversation in all that noise. Not only was the music the problem, but also all the cheering and hooting everyone was engaged in.

Connor smiled and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "Let's step outside," he shouted in his ear and dragged him away.

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After almost one hour of listening to Connor, Jonathan had had it up to his ears and beyond with the guy. At first, he had been polite and tried to follow his reasoning, but when he attempted to offer a different point of view, Connor just cut his words short and insisted on being right.

That made Jonathan regret not drinking more when he had still had a chance. Maybe then enduring Connor's lecture would have been a little more fun. However, his reserve of politeness was starting to wear thin. The worst thing was that Connor didn't even say anything interesting. He was a walking encyclopedia of random facts and numbers, but he offered absolutely no new insight into what they meant. Even worse, he sounded like the mouthpiece for opinions everyone who watched the news already knew and became quite repetitive after a while.

"I would love to stay and chat some more," he took advantage of a small break in Connor's tirade, "but I'm a stickler for schedules, and I'm past my bedtime."

That appeared to take Connor a bit by surprise. He made a disappointed face. "Are you sure you cannot make an exception? We barely scratched the surface. It's Saturday, after all."

"Yes, but I tend to turn into a witch if I don't get my beauty sleep," Jonathan joked.

"Hmm." Connor didn't appear in the least amused. "All right."

Finally, it was over, Jonathan thought and closed his eyes for a second, which was, as it seemed, a mistake, as the next moment he felt the guy's facial hair scratching his lips in a weird attempt to kiss him. Jonathan pulled back before Connor managed to launch his tongue action, which he seemed to have at the ready.

"Have fun," he said and moved away steadily enough so that it didn't look like he hated that completely.

"Sure. See you around, Jonathan," Connor said. "I'd love to get to know you more."

*And turn me into a drone that activates at the sound of your voice, I bet.*

Was he being mean for no reason? But no, the guy was pretty obnoxious, and it didn't matter whether he was gay or not, out and proud, and all that. Jonathan couldn't stand a narcissistic ass, and he liked to believe that he could recognize one after wasting an hour of his time listening to platitudes.

"Yeah, sure. Bye," he waved and hurried down the street.

He wiped his mouth as soon as he was far enough away. Definitely, Connor was using some product for his beard, and now Jonathan was sure he needed to get to his room as fast as possible and wash his mouth out for at least five minutes.

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Maddox was fuming on the inside. Not only had Jonathan let his boyfriend abandon him and mingle with the others, but now he was letting that monkey paw him like he was a banana tree in need of saving? What kind of guy did stuff like that? He had thought he noticed something that

indicated absolute boredom in the way Jonathan leaned against that tree, his arms crossed, while Connor must have been droning on about his tree-hugging ad nauseam. For a moment there, while observing the duo from a distance, he had thought of walking over and rescuing Jonathan, but when Connor had moved in for a kiss, Maddox had turned and walked back to the party.

So, Jonathan Hamilton was an easy lay. And Maddox surely had better things to do than sit there and watch him get fucked against a tree or something kinky like that. He grabbed the girl he had spent the last hour with by the hand, and she followed him happily upstairs.

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“Don’t worry.” She patted his chest and forced a sympathetic smile. “I’ve heard it can happen to anyone.”

No, that was absolutely terrifying. Maddox stared at the ceiling, searching for answers. So the girl had been all over him, and he had felt the familiar tingle in the lower part of his body, but as soon as he closed his eyes, all he saw on the inside of his eyelids was Jonathan, his stupid smile, his weird broad chest, his deformed long legs, and big fucking ass!

And, being the good guy that he wanted to think he was, he had tried to push that away so that he could focus on the girl, her soft, smooth cheeks, her nice rack, and all her other assets.

And then, it had happened. His dick had died on him, not even caring to say a proper goodbye.

“Stress could be a problem,” she added. Clearly she was a nice person and trying to help. “Has anything happened to you lately? Something, I don’t know, to make you sad?”

“My dog died,” he mumbled.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” she caressed his chest gently. “How old was he?”

“She,” Maddox said with a heartfelt sigh. “We had her for twelve years.”

Good thing he had a good imagination. For the next ten minutes, the girl listened to him patiently while he dished out every little detail about a dog he’d never had.

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The girl had assured him that her lips were sealed in regards to his little problem, so now he was back to the party but not in the mood to stick around too long. His eyes fell on Connor, who was with his usual cohort of disciples, talking animatedly and waving his hands. He had been away for how long? Twenty minutes at best? Was Connor done fucking Jonathan against the tree so quickly? He must have skipped foreplay.

He made his way toward the guy. “Hey, Connor,” he called out. “Where’s Jonathan?”

Connor waved. “He left about twenty minutes ago. Something about needing his beauty sleep.”

Maddox could feel his cheeks hurting as his mouth stretched into an impossibly large grin.

Jonathan Hamilton was not an easy lay.

That made him so happy he could get a boner. No, he wasn’t just saying that. He could feel his best friend returning from his trip to the land of the dead. Woot-woot, he was back in business, baby!

“Would you like to join us for a little debate?” Connor asked.

Maddox slapped the guy so hard on the back that Connor almost lost his balance. “Another time, man. I need to go shake hands with a friend I haven’t seen in a while.”

He walked away without giving the other the chance to interject anything else into their short yet meaningful conversation.

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“Why is everyone offering you their condolences?” Kane questioned as they walked to their Monday classes after yet another student stopped by their group to give Maddox a long and sympathetic hug. “Who died in your family? But, more importantly, why are we, your best friends, the last to find out?”

“His dog died,” Rusty said with a long sigh. “Look, it says so right here.” He took out his phone and showed Kane the latest headline on that digital rag pretending to present life on campus as it was. Maddox seriously doubted there was one grain of truth in the bunch of bollocks presented as the so-called truth in there.

“Rusty, Maddox doesn’t have a dog,” Kane said slowly.

“Not anymore, he doesn’t, but he did,” Rusty protested. “It says so right here,” he repeated.

So, the girl had only kept her mouth shut partially. Well, it could be worse, Maddox concluded. The title could have been ‘BMOC can’t get it up because his dog died’, so he needed to be thankful for at least having the girl’s sympathy regarding his little problem. And this time, a grain of truth would have been in it.

“It’s just a misunderstanding, guys,” Maddox said quickly.

“Misunderstanding, huh?” Dex observed him out of the corner of one eye. “It’s incredible, however, how many details about your imaginary dog Xpress managed to create. It sounds like something you’d make up and say about a dog you never had.”

“I have no idea why they write anything that’s in there.”

Kane wasn't buying it, either, by how he stared at him like a disappointed grandma learning that her grandson was lying about his bad grades. "Why are you letting everyone believe it?"

"I can't just tell people the truth. They would feel hurt," Maddox replied.

All right, so it wasn't like he often lied, so it had to be a curse that the one time he did, it had been blown so out of proportion.

"So, just to be clear, you don't have a dog?" Rusty asked.

"No, I don't," Maddox replied. "And I never did. But can you guys keep it between us?"

"Anything for my bro," Rusty promptly said.

"We'll cover your ass," Dex added.

"Sure thing. But boy, I want to know what this is all about. This crush of yours is the worst I've ever seen," Kane commented.

"There's no crush," Maddox protested. "You guys keep imagining things."

"Not worse than imagining fake pets, though," Kane retorted.

So... his buddies were on to him, and he was getting entangled in a bunch of lies. Things were looking pretty bad, and he wasn't sure he could keep everything a secret from them. Not for long, at least.

But what could he tell them when he didn't even know what was happening to him? He had the biggest boner ever for a dude. It didn't matter that the guy looked like he had been sent to Sunny Hill to torture him specifically, given his good looks, sexy ass, and prickly personality.

What mattered was that Maddox was in it deep and had no idea how to solve it, whatever this thing was.

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Ray sniffled and wiped his tears away with the back of his hand. Jonathan stared at him, baffled for a couple of seconds. They were barely back from classes, and he had returned home to find Ray like that.

"What's going on?" he asked, trying hard to ignore the lump in his throat.

Ray sniffled some more, and Jonathan barely had time to open his arms wide to welcome a very distraught roommate to his chest. "...mm, died."

"What? Who died?" In the split of a second, his thoughts turned to his family back home. He hadn't spoken to them in four long months.

“Maddox’s dog,” Ray barely managed and began crying again.

Jonathan breathed out. “All right, that’s quite sad,” he said cautiously as he patted Ray’s head. “But why are you crying so much?”

Ray pointed at his phone, abandoned on the table. “Xpress says that Maddox had her since they were both babies, and that when he was five, she saved him from drowning. And then, when he was seven, she rescued him from a house on fire. And then, when he was ten, she stood guard all night, every night, while he had the flu, and everyone thought he was going to die!”

Jonathan bit his lips hard to stifle a laugh. There was no way all that could be true. It had to be a miracle that Maddox was still alive. The guy needed another dog pronto just to make sure he didn’t stumble over his own feet and fall to his death. He loved Ray, but the amazingly gullible nature of his roommate was something else.

“Um,” he cleared his throat, “but she lived a long and happy life. Twenty years is quite impressive for a dog.”

“She died at twelve,” Ray replied and started crying again as if he just now realized how tragic it was for a dog to die after twelve years of life when she was supposed to have lived twenty.

All right, so he was calling bullshit on that little piece in Xpress. That publication needed to be eradicated like the virus that it was. It was infecting totally sane persons, like Ray. For now, he would allow his roommate some space to process his misplaced grief, but later, he would explain some basic math to him. It would be painful, but it would be worth it.

## *Chapter Five – Trouble Finds You*

He was totally, absolutely, not stalking Jonathan. But he couldn't help but notice the guy entering the sports building and heading for the indoor pool by the looks of it. Well, Maddox was much in the mood for a swim, too, and since only students on good behavior were allowed to use such facilities after dark, it meant that Jonathan had been a goody-two-shoes enough to impress the powers that be, which was quite the feat seeing the short time he had been there at Sunny Hill.

Maddox only needed to pump up the charm to gain entrance everywhere, and he reached for the spare key, he knew where it was hidden, to get inside after Jonathan went in. Funny thing, the guy hadn't bothered to lock up after going in, and he must have used another key. Whatever, Maddox would take care of that because he didn't want their little nocturnal rendezvous ruined by other students happening by.

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He had always loved swimming. It helped him clear his mind and find solutions to complicated problems, such as crushing on a guy who was everything he needed to stay clear of. What was it about Maddox he liked so damned much? Yes, he was attractive. Yes, he was smart. And yes, he was likable, but not only in that superficial way popular kids usually were. It was just his damned luck that, after running away from an impossible situation, he would end up in such a similar one.

Drew had been... Jonathan sighed. He had seemed perfect at first, too, right? Dangerous and sexy, that bad boy appeal, fantastic body, cute smile, and all that. He just couldn't believe he was walking down the same path again. There were differences, however, in how the two compared if he thought about it long enough. Something was a bit twisted in Drew's soul, as far as he could recall, a certain ruthlessness that should have set all his alarm systems on high alert.

Only that he had been too much in love to pay it any mind. And who was to say Maddox wasn't the same, or at least not all that could be gleaned at first sight? He was, after all, engaged in some unsavory activities, and he had the kind of body to prove that was right. He wasn't into sports like his friends, but those callouses on his hands were a clear indication that he could use his fists, not only his natural charm.

Maddox was different, though, a small voice inside him told him over and over again. He shook his head. So what? He was a straight boy, and straight boys were nothing but trouble. Who needed any more of that?

Jonathan finished another lap and then pushed himself up on the edge. He grabbed his towel and, lost in thought, proceeded to dry himself.

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Hmm, so fully naked swimming appeared to be Jonathan's secret pleasure. After the party on Saturday, Maddox hadn't seen him close enough to have a talk, and he couldn't just send a text and ask for them to meet up, especially since he wasn't in the mood to work on a school project, but very much in the mood for something else.

He watched for a while as Jonathan swam around, his body cutting through the water with practiced ease. No wonder he had such a nice lean body. And Maddox could appreciate that he was keeping himself so smooth because that allowed an unhindered sight of all his perfect anatomy. Yeap, all those fantastic tight muscles which Maddox wanted to touch and explore to his heart's content.

He noticed Jonathan pushing himself out of the water and sighed. It was one thing to imagine that perfect behind without clothes covering it and another to see it in all its naked glory; round, perky, tight, everything Maddox loved in an ass. And Jonathan had awesome thighs and calves, too. Dude was built like a fucking movie star. It made Maddox almost willing to forgive him for being around an inch taller. Why that annoyed him, it was hard to say. In his group of friends, he was the shortest, and that had never bothered him before.

It was also equally nice to see him out of his usual conservative attire, with his hair wet and looking somewhat more like a human being instead of like someone you couldn't reach with a ladder to the stars. Jonathan appeared to be lost in thought as he dried himself and then began walking. What could be on his mind?

"Nice weather for a swim," he said.

Jonathan's head snapped up, and his hands clutched the towel, pulling it defensively in front of him. That was a shame because Maddox wanted to check that side out, too. "Geesh, man, what the hell?" Jonathan asked.

"What? Do you think you're the only student who's allowed in here?"

Jonathan averted his eyes.

"O.M.G., did you break in? That was why the door was open! How did you do it?"

"Are you going to tell on me?" Jonathan asked defensively.

"Not if you tell me how you did it. You're so freaking gangsta! Where did you live before coming here? Did you do hard time?"

His words were met with a scoff. Well, now that was the biggest surprise ever. Mr. Goody-Two-Shoes wasn't good at all. He was a bad, bad boy, and Maddox loved that he was the only one who knew about it.

“No, I wasn’t in jail,” Jonathan replied as if that had been a real question. “But I was in an all-boys school and an all-boys college later. And boys get bored quickly if they don’t find something to do with their hands.”

“They can always jerk off,” Maddox offered promptly. “I bet you have some crazy stories to tell. Like, was circle jerking a daily thing?”

That earned him another stern look from Jonathan. Hell, how could he pretend to be all high and mighty after breaking into a school building? That was grounds for getting kicked out, presumably. Hopefully not, because Maddox wanted Jonathan to stick around for as long as they still attended Sunny Hill together. In case someone found out, he would just say he got them in there, so problem solved.

“Is jerking off really the only thing on your mind?” Jonathan asked.

“How could you tell?” Maddox faked surprise. Well, it usually wasn’t, but ever since he had met this dude, he had turned into a compulsive fapper. So, all in all, Jonathan was to blame anyway.

“You’re surprisingly peppy for someone who lost a dear one only recently,” Jonathan said, changing tack.

Maddox narrowed his eyes. What was he going on about now? Lost who?

“Your dog,” Jonathan supplied while quirking an eyebrow and letting a small smile tug at his lips.

“Oh, my dog, yeah. Sad, sad story. He got killed in a car crash.”

“I thought she,” Jonathan’s smile grew wider, “had to be put to sleep because she had cancer.”

“Right, right, I mix them up all the time.”

“So, you have two dogs that died?” Jonathan was clearly biting his lip not to break into laughter.

Maddox didn’t stop, though. He started snickering. “You saw through that, huh?”

“Well, it wasn’t that hard. What kind of dark magic are you using to make all these people believe whatever flies out of your mouth?”

“How do you know it wasn’t all invented by that stupid online fake news piece of shit?”

An appreciative look from Jonathan let him know that he wasn’t alone in his opinion.

“Well, because you didn’t deny it and basked in the attention for the last few days,” Jonathan said promptly.

As he spoke, he attempted to cross his arms, and, in the process, he moved the towel away. Maddox grinned, angled his head, and allowed his eyes to wander. Way too soon, Jonathan moved his hand down again and covered the most interesting part of him. Well, it was the most interesting because Maddox hadn't seen it yet, although he could tell the guy was interesting pretty much everywhere.

"Why so shy, gangsta boy? Weren't you in an all-boys school? I bet it was a sausage fest all day long." Maddox made a gesture to grab an imaginary dick and swing it around.

"Well, there's an imbalance here. You're all dressed and I'm naked," Jonathan pointed out.

"That's easy to correct." Maddox pulled his t-shirt over his head in one fell swoop.

"Have fun, then. I'm heading out."

Ha, like he would let that happen. He grabbed Jonathan's towel fast and pushed the guy back into the pool. Jonathan huffed as he emerged from his involuntary dunking and glared at Maddox like he wanted a piece of him. Maddox laughed and continued to undress. "Let's race. I bet I'm faster."

"Hey, don't be a pig. Shower first." Jonathan pointed with his arm in the direction of the facilities.

"Hmm, I don't know," Maddox drawled the words. "Are you going to wash my back?"

To his surprise, Jonathan swam toward the edge. "Sure. Anything to ensure that you're clean before getting into the water."

Well, he had said that mostly to tease, but when had he ever backed down from a challenge?

"After you," Jonathan said as soon as he was out of the pool.

Dex's theories about who was gay or not had to suffer some adjustments, because while Jonathan didn't check out girls' cleavages, he also surely kept his eyes steady without letting them wander lower to check out Maddox's junk of which, by the way, he was very much proud and wanted to show off.

Could it be that he wasn't his type? After all, Ray the roommate was skinny and looked like a gust of wind could topple him over. Was that what Jonathan liked, after all? Someone he could overpower quickly and hold under him while pounding...

"Hey." Jonathan snapped his fingers in front of him. "Shower. Don't think I'm fooled by your pretty boy smile like the rest of the universe."

Maddox shrugged and turned on his heels, all the while pretending that he hadn't just imagined Jonathan fucking his boyfriend. Even if his cock got a little hard, since no one seemed interested

in looking at it, it could do its little happy dance without fear of being discovered. He stole a look behind and couldn't help but smile.

Jonathan was totally scoping his butt. It was hard to tell what he was thinking since his face was all a frown, but he was. And that was an up point, no doubt about it.

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Maddox's bravado was something to behold, but it looked like none of it was left when Jonathan took the soap and began washing his back. The famous bad boy was so quiet now that the sound of running water seemed unusually loud.

If Maddox had walked in there thinking it was a dare or something silly like that, it must be backfiring if his shy silence was anything to go by. Jonathan had no intention of pushing it, and he wasn't the type to tease people, even when presented with such an opportunity on a silver platter.

He pressed his hands against Maddox's back and moved them slowly. That wasn't supposed to be happening. He should just rub the naughty straight boy's back clean in under one minute and be done with it.

But no, his hands lingered, feeling the muscles underneath the smooth skin. Maddox was going to drive him crazy this year, and Jonathan just needed to accept it. While clothed, he could only guess what lay beneath those garments, and now, his imagination was fueled with the fantastic sight of a broad back that tapered down to a lean and strong waist. He couldn't resist letting his eyes go lower, resting on the small of Maddox's back, just above the enticing curve of a lovely ass. For now, he had managed to avoid staring at the other boy's cock, but it was inevitable that his fantasies would soon be filled with images of that, too.

And he bet Maddox was exceptional in that respect.

"Hmm, that feels good," Maddox purred as Jonathan moved his hands around, stopping short of that scrumptious behind.

If it was him from one year ago, he would wrap his hands around that broad chest, filling them with the perfect pectorals, and he would press his lips against the slight curve of a round shoulder. He would align their bodies together and let the water pour down their skin while he would allow pure unadulterated ecstasy to take him over, forgetting about anyone and anything else existing in the world.

He stepped away. "I believe that takes care of it," he said in a raspy voice. "I'll leave you with the rest. Be thorough, okay?"

"Yes, dad," Maddox threw over his shoulder.

Jonathan smiled. Maddox probably couldn't imagine what he was doing to him, but it was fine. He walked out of the shower and dunked himself in the cold pool water to clear his mind.

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What the fucking hell? Maddox grabbed his cock and squeezed it until his erection finally decided to take a breather. He had practically stood there, waiting for Jonathan to take a fucking hint, and nothing had happened! Nothing!

He had never been in that kind of situation before. How did girls do it when they wanted a dude to get it on with them? Maddox had kind of an idea, but he doubted that he could flutter his eyelashes at Jonathan, smile prettily, bite his lips, and caress the guy's arm with a hidden promise in his eyes.

Well, maybe he should have done all that because simply standing there doing nothing hadn't worked. At all. It had to be that he wasn't the guy's type, but fucking tough bananas, Jonathan surely was his. He had seen naked dudes by the ton in his life, and it had been nothing like this before. Even his hands felt nice, firm, long fingers working his muscles...

He needed to up his game, he decided and began soaping rapidly. There was no way, but absolutely no way that his dude could provide so much fap material and not see what he was doing. Maddox felt his good mood returning as a sly plan began forming in his head.

Jonathan was already back in the water, so Maddox let out a war cry, rushed toward the edge, and jumped, making a big splash. When he resurfaced, he was happy to see Jonathan laughing. He was so serious most of the time and clearly needed to unwind more often. Maddox splashed some water in his direction, and Jonathan ducked.

"So, what should we bet on?"

Maddox pondered. "Whoever loses has to answer the other's questions."

"One question," Jonathan replied. "There's no way I'm letting you pick my brain, or tomorrow Xpress is going to spread all over the place that I like sticking feathers in my ass and eating strawberry-flavored edible underwear."

"Is that the kind of thing you're into?" Maddox grinned and watched Jonathan, who gave him a broad smile in return.

"Of course not. That would be their version of our conversation if I told you I liked ice cream and that I once petted a chicken when I was four."

"All right. One question. But just so you know, everything you say, it'll stay between us." With that, Maddox moved quickly and cut through the water, taking Jonathan by surprise. "It's on!"

“You cheeky --” Jonathan stopped with a huff and took off after him.

The guy was fast and strong, but Maddox was willing to kill his lungs over finding the answer to the question he wanted to ask. He focused on moving as fast as possible and pushed all his muscles until he got to the other side.

Jonathan soon followed him, but it was clear as day who won. “I didn’t think you were a cheater!”

“Your fault for not paying attention,” Maddox shot at him.

He hoisted himself up and sat on the edge. Jonathan followed his example, and this time, Maddox stole a look at the guy’s cock. It looked like Mr. Perfectly Groomed liked leaving a little bit of a bush right above his sex. That was nice and a bit kinky. Maddox felt an itch to grab the guy by the hair down there and then stroke his cock, which unlike his which seemed to be in overdrive, was completely flaccid now. Still, it looked yummy even in its dormant state.

“So, what do you want to know?” Jonathan woke him from his reverie.

“Ah, right. Top or bottom?”

“Excuse me?”

“No, I won’t. Are you a top or a bottom?”

“Is this what you want to know? The straight boys here are an interesting bunch.”

“Not all, just me. Now dish out. Which one are you?”

Jonathan rested his hands on his knees. “I don’t know exactly. I suppose I’d be versatile, but I haven’t tried either yet.”

“What? Are you a virgin?”

“Hey, you said one question,” Jonathan warned him sternly.

“It’s not really a question since I already know the answer. You’re a freaking cherry boy!”

“Ha, ha, so funny.”

“So, you’ve never been with a guy?” Maddox pressed further. Now that was a juicy piece of info, not that he would share it with anyone.

“I didn’t say that.” A short, tense silence followed.

Maddox could smell there was a big thing there, but this time he didn't push. "Well, that's a bit of a shock," he commented. "The way you look, I thought you must have had over half of that all-boys school of yours bending over for you."

Jonathan burst out laughing. "Do I really look like someone easy?"

Maddox snorted. "A total manwhore. Really, who cares about looking as perfect as you do unless he wants to get laid all the time?"

"Funny thing to say, coming from the guy famous for having slept with hundreds of girls. And also putting a great deal of effort into his looks."

Maddox had never been annoyed before by the stupid stories people told about him, especially when they involved his sexual prowess, but this time, Jonathan's remark irked him. "That's like 95% not the truth," he said quickly. As for putting effort in the way he looked... well, he was a tiny bit vain, that was true.

"But there's still the 5%, right?" Jonathan teased him. "How many girlfriends have you had, Maddox?"

"I don't have to answer that." Maddox pouted and crossed his arms. "You lost."

"It looks like I did."

They remained silent for a while. Maddox could feel a smidge of nervousness growing inside him. "Let's jerk off," he said abruptly.

Jonathan's head snapped in his direction. "What? Just like that?"

Maddox wasn't going to let this opportunity pass. He would see that sleepy cock in action, and he would see it tonight. "Consider it a welcome party that will make your transition from that all-fap school you were at before a lil' bit easier."

"All-fap school," Jonathan said slowly. "You have some weird notions about what goes on in such places."

Well, he wasn't saying 'no', and that was a good thing. Maddox stood and offered Jonathan his hand. "It will be fun, I promise. And it's for a good cause since I like to excel in all areas of campus life." That earned him a small snicker from the other. "I need to compare notes. You know, it's tough to be an accomplished student unless you compete against others."

Jonathan blinked a few times, probably expecting him to break into a laugh and say that had been nothing but a joke. Maddox was determined to get what he wanted. "What? You don't jerk off?"

"I obviously do, but it's called solo action for a reason," Jonathan said, yet it was clear in his voice that he was considering it.

“Told you, everything we say or do here tonight stays between us,” Maddox insisted. “Or,” he said with a sly smile, “I could tell on you for breaking in, so... choose.”

Jonathan chuckled and finally took his hand. They rushed to a pair of reclining chairs and exchanged a brief glance before lying down. Maddox fought a smile of triumph; Jonathan’s slightly pink cheeks told the whole story. Score.

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He could blame it on Maddox taking him by surprise, but in all truth, his resolution to resist the resident bad boy’s charm was growing thin and weary. Only through an incredible power of will had he managed to keep his cock from springing out like a jack-in-a-box at every move Maddox made.

And now, they were seated side by side, eyeing each other like they were competitors in a game of chess, waiting for the main event to begin.

“This is a bit weird,” Jonathan mumbled. “I have no idea why I said ‘yes’.”

“It’s not weird,” Maddox retorted. “Guys do it all the time.”

“You mean,” Jonathan asked, a bit confused, “you do this with your straight friends?”

Maddox kept his face neutral as he spoke. “Yeah, all the time.” That was a big fat lie, except for that time when he and Rusty had tried to prove something, which left them not daring to look each other in the eye for a whole week.

“Sunny Hill must be an out of this world place,” Jonathan commented. “But how are we supposed to, you know, get into it?”

“I can serve as inspiration. I don’t mind.”

Jonathan hoped dearly that he didn’t look like a deranged person as his eyes traveled down Maddox’s body. They were playing it safe, right? It was just jerking off, and he didn’t want to come across as a prude. He understood why everyone loved Maddox. The guy was easy to be around, good-natured, and amusing. And that was how he made everyone do whatever he wanted.

This was as far as they would go. And since Maddox was the initiator –

He stopped for a moment. Why did it matter? Was he starting to lie to himself again?

“Hey,” Maddox called to him softly. “It’s okay if you don’t like to look at my body or something. You don’t have to force yourself. Think of someone you like or whatever.”

Jonathan couldn't suppress a small grunt. Had Maddox sounded vulnerable just then? It couldn't be an act, he decided. But why would a popular boy like him feel anything of the kind? Jonathan took a longing look at the flat abdomen and followed the treasure trail down to the other's sex that was already hard and ready. Maddox wasn't even touching it, yet the thing twitched slightly, and there was a bead of precum in its tiny eye.

Jonathan swallowed hard. How little would it take to scoot over and fill his mouth with that tempting thing. But no, he wouldn't make the same mistake again. Tonight, he would do nothing more than watch, and that was crazy enough seeing how the boy by his side was straight, a womanizer, and too beautiful to consider for a moment desperate enough for a jerking session with a gay guy.

"No, it's fine," he barely managed. Maddox had hair in all the right places, not excessive, and just enough to be enticing in a natural way. And he was packed with muscles everywhere, Jonathan couldn't help but notice as he took in the perfect thigh a bit raised and propped against the arm of the chair allowing anyone looking a clear view of his large ball sack that appeared deliciously full.

The chances of meeting Maddox again like this were slim, and maybe his fantasies needed a bit of the real thing to finally reach their zenith. So Jonathan grabbed his cock and pulled the skin back with a punishing stroke. The harder he did it, the more pleasurable it felt. Maddox let out a slight sound of appreciation, and his hand began to move up and down, too. He brushed his thumb over the head from time to time, pressing it into the snake's eye like he was manipulating a shaken bottle of champagne.

"Man, that looks brutal," Maddox commented.

Their breathing was too loud, and Jonathan could feel goosebumps everywhere. His cock needed some hard discipline, it was true. But he couldn't help but notice how Maddox kept on torturing his own mushroom. "And that looks like a sadist's work from where I sit."

Maddox let out a ragged laugh. "How about we switch?"

"What do you mean?" Jonathan was staring openly now, enjoying the view a bit too much.

Maddox took him by surprise when he stood and walked over. Jonathan had no time to react as the other straddled him, pressing his ball sack directly against his. "You do mine, and I do yours."

"Ah," Jonathan said, for lack of words.

He was frozen in place, and his cock was pulsing like mad in his hand, although he had stopped rubbing it. Maddox pushed his hand away and then seized his cock. Jonathan moaned when the rough thumb brushed over the sensitive head.

“Come on, do me,” Maddox urged him.

This wasn't happening, right? He was just having the most vivid dream ever, and he was bound to wake up soon. He took Maddox's cock hesitantly and closed his eyes. Together with that insane torture on his cock, he risked blowing prematurely.

“Why are you so gentle?” Maddox whispered. “Do mine like you do yours.”

“You sure?” Jonathan asked in a whisper, his eyes still closed.

“I'm not going to go easy on you, so suit yourself.”

Maybe Maddox needed to be taught a lesson so that he would stop with all the mischief. So Jonathan took a firm hold of the beautiful thing in his hand and pushed down the skin with all his strength.

“Oh, yes,” Maddox breathed out. “Man, your dick is uber nice. Totally a grower.”

It must have grown beyond its usual capabilities, Jonathan thought. He half-closed his eyes to observe Maddox's cock. It was thick and veiny, not as long as his, but definitely used to a lot of action. Was it a good thing to look at it from this close?

He could feel the other's weight on his thighs, and everywhere their bodies touched, fire burned. One risky look higher, and his eyes came to rest on Maddox's face. His sensual lips were parted, his pretty eyes were glowing, and he was blinking lazily while moaning now and then.

That had been the wrong move because his already impossibly high pleasure shot up to the next level. He grabbed the arm of the chair with his free hand and groaned as he came all over his chest.

“Fucking A,” Maddox whispered, and Jonathan felt a second round landing on his abdomen, some of the cum landing on his fingers as he continued to keep the guy's cock in his tight grip.

He closed his eyes again. It was official. He was losing his mind, and he was doing it over a straight boy who could turn him into his puppet at a snap of his fingers.

“I need to go wash,” he said abruptly and almost pushed Maddox hard enough to make him land on his ass.

Good thing Maddox wasn't some feeble character. He managed to land on his feet just fine as Jonathan pushed past him and rushed into the shower.

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So that had been both mind-blowing and a letdown at the same time. Maddox didn't follow Jonathan into the shower and just began picking his clothes up from where he had left them. He

had his pride, after all, and the guy had kind of pissed on it by running away to wash like his cum was radioactive or something. Really, he wouldn't want to get out faster if the entire building was on fire.

Was Jonathan one of those people who couldn't stand to be touched by others? The kind who worried about microbes and stuff all the time? That reaction at the end had left him completely stunned. Otherwise, the other's smooth hand on his dick had been pure fucking pleasure, just as his moans and the way he tilted his head back had provided Maddox with fresh new entries to his spank bank.

Fuck, he needed to find a way to take his mind off Jonathan. No wonder he was still a virgin at twenty; he probably couldn't stand other dudes and their cum, and just imagined himself gay so that he didn't have to confront his phobias.

Or maybe, just maybe, he couldn't stand Maddox's cum, which was bad because cumming all over those nice hard pecs and abs had been practically everything.

He walked over to the showers and washed his hands in a sink. "I'll leave the key in the door," he shouted. "Make sure to lock up on your way out and put the key under the third flowerpot on the right, okay?"

He didn't wait for an answer. If Jonathan couldn't stand him, he wouldn't stand him, either. Maddox pursed his lips and marched out of the room. To say that had been a blow to his ego was putting it lightly.

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Jonathan waited for the sound of departing steps to die out. He slammed his hand against the wall hard, again and again, waiting for the pain to flare until the hammering in his chest would finally give in.

He couldn't allow himself to do that, no matter how forthcoming Maddox seemed to be. The disaster named Drew had almost cost him everything, and he would never let that happen again. There were only so many chances someone like him could take.

## *Chapter Six – Something Wonderful*

Maddox chewed his gum mindlessly while letting his mind wander off. These days, he was off most of the time as he seemed incapable of getting that thing with Jonathan out of his head. He had turned into the equivalent of a socially inadequate porcupine, and people preferred to get out of his way when they saw him coming, allowing him the space necessary to work out of his system whatever he needed to work out of his system.

The problem was he had no idea how to work it out. Well, rejection fucking stung, and since it was for the first time in his life he suffered it when it mattered, he felt utterly messed up. Each time he closed his eyes, he could only see Jonathan's climax face turning into stone in the blink of an eye. Had he been, what? Disgusted? What of him could cause that kind of reaction in a person?

Was it weird that he didn't know about it because he couldn't see it, and other people didn't want to tell him because they pitied him? Maddox had examined himself in the mirror from all possible angles and couldn't see it if it killed him.

He barely registered Kane plunking down by his side on the sofa in the living room. Instead of offering a greeting, he barely let out a grunt.

Kane sighed and placed a hand on his knee. Oh, no, this had to be some kind of intervention. "Deedee," his friend called softly, "what exactly is this girl doing to you to make you so messed up?"

And he had just pulled the 'Deedee' card on him, which was something Kane did only when he wanted to have a heartfelt conversation. Because he'd had a girlfriend for three years, he was the only one in their group who seemed to have developed extra skills, all dealing with emotional stuff, which everyone hated when they were used on them but also appreciated for being actually helpful.

"There's no girl," he mumbled.

"If there's no girl, you're really starting to scare me. Is someone in your family ill or something?"

He couldn't lie about serious stuff like that. "It's a girl," he said reluctantly. He wasn't yet at the point where he could admit to his friends that he was crushing on a dude.

"All right." Kane exhaled. "So, you dig her, and she doesn't dig you back?"

"Something like that," Maddox mumbled and began munching on a hangnail.

Kane grabbed his arm and forced it down. "I'm not just going to tell you that you need to talk. I'm actually going to interrogate you."

Ha! Like that would scare him. He looked down stubbornly.

“All right,” Kane said with a sigh, “let’s start. Was she, like, hands off, dude, from the start, or something?”

Maddox swung his head from one side to the other. “Not... really. We... well, touched each other and stuff.” Good thing he hadn’t just blurted out something insane like having had jerked off with an imaginary girl.

“Ah, so she must be at least a little into you. What makes you think she doesn’t like you?”

‘She’ had run away with Maddox’s cum on ‘her’ like there was a rocket in ‘her’ butt. But he couldn’t say that outright.

“She’s like distant and stuff,” Maddox replied.

“Is there something going on in her life right now? Maybe she doesn’t feel hooking up is a good idea for her right now.”

“It’s more than hooking up,” Maddox replied in an irritated voice and then instantly wished that he could take the words back.

“Really?” Kane’s eyes lit up for a moment. “Since when?”

“Since it’s about her. I mean, I don’t know! Can we not have this conversation?” Maddox whined.

“No, we cannot not have this conversation,” Kane replied firmly. “So, it’s serious. Our little boy is finally growing up.”

“Shut up, lifer,” Maddox replied. “I don’t know what it is. Maybe if I hooked up with her, I’d be over it.”

Maybe.

Oh, what a big fat ‘maybe’. Would once be enough to check off the list all the things he wanted to do with Jonathan, to Jonathan, and around Jonathan? It would have to be a pretty long hookup, and hopefully it would happen without his dick falling off at the end from coming too many times.

“What if she’s not into hooking up?” Kane asked.

“She could be,” Maddox said with a shrug.

“You don’t know a lot about this girl, do you?”

Through no fault of his own. He wanted to get to know Jonathan more a great deal, but who could hold down that guy for more than a couple of minutes? That had been the most he had gotten when meeting him around campus and exchanging no more than a few superficial lines?

“What if she’s not into boys?” Kane asked. “You know how long it took Louise’s sister to come out. It was hard for her, and she tried to deny her true self for a long time before she decided she was done with hiding.”

Louise was Kane’s girlfriend, and her big sis had only last year come out to their parents. It had been quite difficult for her to admit it, especially to herself, as Kane had told them later.

“Oh, don’t worry, she’s into boys. She’s just not into me. There’s something wrong with me,” Maddox said the last words, and his mind went reeling. “It is something wrong with me,” he repeated.

“Hey, hey, slow down, what could be wrong with you? You’re a handsome mofo, you’re fun, and you clearly want her,” Kane offered his input right away.

“But I’m a player,” Maddox said like he finally saw the light. “She must think I’m a walking STD.”

“Wow, wow,” Kane began, clearly stunned by the sudden evolution of their conversation. “You always use protection, right?”

“Of course I do, but she doesn’t know it. That’s it. This is what I have to do.”

“What exactly? Tell her that you’re a condom type of guy? I assume she is, too, if she has her head on her shoulders, so --”

“I’m going to get tested, and then I’m going to shove that thing right under his nose!” Maddox smacked his right palm with his left fist.

“His?” Kane asked.

“What?”

“You said ‘his nose’.”

“No, I didn’t,” Maddox denied.

Kane blinked a couple of times. “I either heard it wrong, or you’re more fucked up than I imagined. Which you clearly are. Well, get tested if that’s going to give you peace of mind. But, as a friend, I must tell you that the chances are that her reluctance to get with you might have nothing to do with it. The entire campus knows you’re the poster boy for safe sex. So, she must know it, too.”

Maddox stood abruptly, no longer hearing whatever Kane was babbling about.

“Are you going right now?”

“The sooner, the better.”

If Kane had other heartfelt things to say, Maddox would just have to listen to them another time.

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Jonathan dreaded the day when he had Statistics for a good reason. So far, he had managed to stay clear of Maddox and just exchange a few innocuous words with him whenever they met under the pretext that he always needed to be somewhere. Also, there was the project they needed to be working on together, so sooner or later, they would find themselves face to face.

The worst part was that Maddox looked like there was something serious bothering him. Since he had perked up his ears whenever Ray talked about the latest news being churned out by the gossip mill, he knew that nothing untoward had happened to him except for their little late-night tryst at the pool.

After several days, Maddox should have been over it. He was popular, handsome, everyone liked him, and there were dozens of girls who wouldn't mind, surely, to make him forget about almost being dropped on his ass by a guy he had masturbated with for the fun of it.

At first, he had tried to shake off the feeling of guilt by telling himself that Maddox needed to get used to a bit of rejection in his perfect life. But seeing those pretty gray eyes filled with longing and suffering didn't support his case. If there was anything he could do about it, he wanted Maddox to not suffer one moment for as long as he lived.

But what was he to do? Tell him that everything was fine? But what if Maddox then wanted to repeat the experience? No, that was definitely out of the question. Jonathan felt that he had committed a huge mistake by giving in to the temptation once. Maddox was addictive if one was unfortunate enough to do as little as look at him and bask for a moment in that pretty boy smile. And now that he knew how Maddox looked in the throes of pleasure, he was completely doomed.

He had himself to consider, he tried to say to the rational part of him that still lay in there, somewhere. What would happen if he let Maddox in? The straight boy would have his fun and then move on. And that was the best of all scenarios. No guy with such a track record in getting girls would, all of a sudden, decide to settle for a relationship with a gay guy.

A groan traveled up his throat as he found his way to the last row, as usual. He wasn't allowed even to consider such a possibility. At best, at the absolute best, Maddox just wanted to fool around, jerk off, experiment a little, maybe, check that off his list, and then return to his usual womanizing.

Jonathan was insane even to consider that there was more to it than that. Nonetheless, he had made things awkward enough between them by accepting that invitation to mutual masturbation and then by fleeing the scene in that manner. He would have to make things right somehow, and that without leaving room for misinterpretation.

His breath caught in his chest when he saw Maddox entering the lecture hall. He looked better, and his usual cocky smile was back where it belonged. Well, it had been a few rough days, but it appeared that Maddox was finally over it, which was good.

Yes, it was good, he decided and repeated the thing a few times in his head. Until his eyes crossed with Maddox's, and the smug grin that was clearly addressed to him made his heart skip a beat. What was that all about now? A wink followed, and then Maddox plopped himself into his seat, leaving Jonathan with all the questions.

He loved Statistics, but it seemed he would have a hard time focusing on the lecture again just because that guy was in the same room. His phone buzzed quietly, and he frowned. After stealing a few glances around, he surreptitiously took it out and checked the screen.

*Today, after classes, you and I, at the library, it's on. We'll work on it.*

Ah, the project, of course. Jonathan typed a quick 'K' and then put the phone away as cautiously as he could. Then he stared at Maddox just as the guy turned his head and flashed a smile at him. Somehow, he couldn't stop thinking that smile boded nothing good.

What kind of torture was in store for him now?

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Maddox could barely keep in his excitement as he entered the library and spotted Jonathan at a table, working on his laptop, those sexy glasses on, and wearing a serious expression on his face. He walked over, and in one fell swoop, produced the copy he had requested from the medical office where he had had his tests done. "Read them and weep," he said with emphasis and plopped into the seat across from Jonathan.

His eyes were like a hawk's as he observed the other picking up the paper and giving it a long and thoughtful look.

"What's this?" Jonathan asked.

Maddox placed his hands behind his head, stretched, and offered a lopsided grin. "It says right there that my cum is not radioactive."

"Um, congratulations?" Jonathan's lips curled into a small confused smile.

Maddox leaned forward abruptly and whispered, “I haven’t been with a girl since the beginning of summer.”

“Well, I saw you with my own eyes with a cute blond girl at the party the first Saturday of this semester,” Jonathan pointed out.

“So you noticed. You must have been looking for me, then,” Maddox said with a grin.

“Don’t be absurd. Everyone noticed. It’s not like you’re anything less than a superstar wherever you go, let alone a party.”

Well, it was a compliment, and he was willing to take it. However, he needed to clear up any misunderstandings.

“Nothing happened with her.” Maddox waved impatiently. “It was the night my dog died. And by that, I actually mean the other thing that starts with a ‘d’ and is also man’s best friend.”

The confusion in Jonathan’s eyes was beyond hilarious, but Maddox didn’t want to jinx it somehow by laughing in the guy’s face.

“Oh, you mean... oh,” Jonathan said slowly. “It... died? But I’m sure it was in perfect working order the night we --” He stopped abruptly and bit his lower lip in the most adorable way. Maddox had a mind to ask him if he was allowed to bite it instead. He was so damned sure it had to be delicious.

“Yeap, all ‘cause of you,” Maddox drawled each word while taking in every one of the other’s reactions.

“Because of me?”

Oh, man, how could he be so oblivious? But that just made him so much cuter that Maddox wanted to lean over the table and smooch him until both of them were breathless. And then, those amber eyes would look all shiny and hazy, and Maddox would just take his time tasting each lip at a time, each corner, inside and out --

“Hey, Earth to Maddox.” Jonathan snapped him back to reality. “Let’s start working. I’d like to grab a quick bite before I start my shift.”

“We could have something together if you’re hungry now.”

“No,” Jonathan said sharply. “Let’s get this done with.”

Hmm, that would have normally deflated Maddox’s high spirits a smidge, but he was too pumped up to care. Tonight, just before closing time, Jonathan would get a little visit. For now, he needed to prove he could play it cool. So, without commenting on anything else, he grabbed his laptop and focused on their project.

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Jonathan had found it hard to focus during his shift after his meeting with Maddox. Why had he done that, showing him proof that he was STD-free? Did he believe that Jonathan thought something like that of him? It was confirmed that the guy was a player, as far as Xpress cared to document his sex life, according to Ray, but in all truth, the local tabloid had expressed concern over the prettiest boy on campus not hooking up like he used to. Of course, the death of that imaginary pet appeared to satisfy the gossip mill for now with regard to Maddox's lack of romps in the hay, but how long would that last? Either way, not for one moment had Jonathan thought anything that required the dutiful presentation of a complete set of health tests, as Maddox had done.

In truth, Jonathan was getting a bit sick of Xpress and their addiction to sticking their nose into everyone's business. He had been trying to wean Ray off that thing, so far with no success. His roommate had admitted that it was a guilty pleasure and that he knew not everything in it was true, but it looked like he was too naïve to understand that some people could get hurt by that kind of fake news.

As the last student came back with some books and he went to put them in their rightful places, the door opened again. Jonathan grimaced and scolded himself for not locking it, but as he emerged from the rows of bookshelves, he put on his most affable smile. Maybe it was someone who needed to return a book at the last minute. It would be no trouble to help them out.

He stopped abruptly when he saw who it was. Maddox was standing right there, his hands in the pockets of his jeans, in a white t-shirt with the sleeves rolled up to show off his biceps, and wearing a dazzling smile on his face.

Despite the poor fashion sense he appeared to be displaying with the horrendous manner in which he wore his t-shirts, he looked amazing as always. Jonathan ached to touch those perfect arms, let his fingers run along them and squeeze them lightly, just to prove to himself that they were real flesh and blood and not pure granite as they appeared. The weather was slowly changing, but it looked like Maddox hadn't thought of grabbing his jacket.

"Hi," he said, trying to swallow the sudden ball stuck at the base of his throat, "I was just about to close. Is there some book you want?"

"Yeah," Maddox said and walked slowly toward him.

Jonathan couldn't help but notice that slight swing of hips as Maddox moved. He had to know how sexy he was, and he had to know that he needed to dial it down a little so that he didn't end up causing accidents everywhere he went.

"Okay," he said as he managed, somehow, to sound natural and not at all affected by the sight in front of him, "what do you need?"

Maddox made a gesture with his chin. “Don’t you want to lock up? So that no one else comes in?”

Jonathan nodded and moved stiffly past Maddox, trying hard not to inhale as they brushed against each other. Quite inconveniently, Maddox had placed himself in the middle of the hallway, and even trying to get around him required a bit of touching.

He locked the door, all the while willing his heart to stop beating so wildly. There was something strange going on every time he was in close quarters with Maddox. And alone.

When he turned around, Maddox was already walking down one of the aisles. Probably he already knew where to find what he needed. Jonathan followed him.

“Have you ever imagined how it would feel to have sex in a library?”

Jonathan pursed his lips and squeezed his eyes tight for a moment. “No, I can’t say that I have. Is this your idea of entertainment? Risky situations?”

Maddox shrugged lazily. He threw Jonathan an all-knowing look. “Could be.”

Jonathan turned his head to look at the bookshelves, searching for something to hang on to, anything other than Maddox.

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So he was trying to play it cool, but it was so damned clear that Jonathan wanted him. His cheeks were slightly pink, he kept licking his lips, and he blinked so prettily now and then. Maddox shrugged and grabbed Jonathan by the shoulders. The next moment, their lips collided, and it was so good, so sweet, that Maddox could feel his toes curling in his kicks.

That was the good moment because one later, he was pushed back furiously...

And punched in the face.

“Ouch, ouch, what the hell?” Maddox grabbed his nose and groaned at the sudden pain.

Fuck, something was pouring out of his nose. He took away his hands and stared at them. It was fucking blood!

“Oh my god,” Jonathan babbled, “you’re bleeding!”

“No shit, Sherlock. You fucking hit me! Why did you do that?”

Jonathan, who had seemed frozen in place for a couple of seconds, went into a frenzy. He grabbed Maddox by one arm and began dragging him. “I’m so, so sorry. I didn’t even think I’d land that. I sincerely thought you would block or dodge or --”

“Where are you taking me? To the torture room to get your kicks? And why would you even think I’d be able to dodge a punch to the face?”

“Aren’t you a big shot fighter?”

A what?

“And I’m just taking you to the bathroom to get you washed. Seriously, Maddox, I’m sorry. You just took me completely off-guard and --”

“No wonder you’re a freaking virgin if you punch all the guys who try to kiss you in the face. You’re so violent!” Well, the blood wasn’t stopping, but the pain that had flared at first was now turning into a low-frequency pulse.

“I don’t punch anyone,” Jonathan retorted. “Just you,” he added after a short pause.

Maddox felt like grinning despite the pain.

Jonathan helped him wash his face and then grabbed a small first aid kit. He began to baby him, wiping his face and then stuffing his nose with small cotton balls. Then he took him to a bench and had him lie down. Maddox had to admit that he enjoyed the attention, despite his hurting nose. Jonathan crouched by his side and caressed his forehead. He looked so seriously chastened, it was way too funny.

“Let me bring a pillow to rest your head on. Just tilt your head back a little to help the bleeding stop.”

Maddox grabbed Jonathan’s arm to prevent him from going. “Don’t leave my side, I beg you. It’s so cold,” he said in an exaggerated, dramatic voice, “my whole life is flashing before my eyes. Oh, look, that was where I put my Pokémon card collection in fifth grade.”

Jonathan chuckled and slapped him playfully on the shoulder. “Oh, god, you’re such a joker. You sure you don’t need that pillow? This bench is hard.”

“Just hold my head on your arm, and I’ll be fine,” Maddox said promptly.

He was pushing it, but he had already been punched in the face, and he doubted Jonathan would do that again soon. However, he was pleasantly surprised when Jonathan lifted his head gently and then snuck his arm underneath to support it.

“How is it? Does it hurt a lot?” Jonathan asked.

Their faces were so close, but Maddox doubted he looked very sexy now with his nose stuffed with cotton balls. “It does,” he whined.

Jonathan smiled. “No wonder everyone’s crazy about you. I had no idea guys like you would be able to pull off the puppy eyes look so easily.”

Maddox blinked slowly and made his best effort to look as charming as he could under the circumstances. Jonathan caressed his hair with his other hand, pushing it out of his eyes.

“Do you think you can stand?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

Jonathan helped him up. “Your t-shirt is ruined,” he said.

Maddox looked at the few red dots on it. It was already late, so no one would notice. “Yeah, but hey, I don’t go to battle against Muhammad Ali every day.”

That earned him another sweet smile from Jonathan. “I’ll give you mine. Just take it off.”

It wasn’t anything like he had imagined the point where they would both take their clothes off again would be, but it was still good. Maddox pulled his t-shirt over his head and handed it to Jonathan, who left it on the bench. It was just so damned funny how hard the guy was trying not to stare at him.

Jonathan Hamilton was a challenge, but that only made him all the more worth it. Maddox watched him with hungry eyes as he took off the light sweater he was wearing and then removed his pristine white t-shirt. Damn, that body was so fine, nicely defined muscles everywhere, but lean and looking nothing like a gym rat. Slight curves balanced the hard planes of his torso in all the right places. He was real and warm, and anyone in their right mind would just reach out and touch him.

Jonathan handed the t-shirt to Maddox and then put his sweater back on hastily.

Maddox held it for a moment and pretended to sniff it. “Too bad I can’t smell this,” he said playfully.

Jonathan grinned and then shook his head. “No problem. I can tell you it reeks of old money.”

Maddox chortled. “You got me.” He pulled the t-shirt over his head.

Just as he began to roll the sleeves up, Jonathan stopped him. “Maddox, baby, please, just don’t. You have amazing arms, we all get it, but no.” To get his point across, he rolled the sleeves back down and smoothed them out with his palms.

“Did you just call me ‘baby’?” Maddox asked quickly, “Do it again.”

“You’re a big baby,” Jonathan said. “A cry baby.”

“Ah, come on, not like that,” Maddox complained.

“How do you feel?” Jonathan asked him, the seriousness from before returning in full-force.

“I’ve been better,” Maddox joked. “But, since I see you still feel guilty, how about you kiss me to make it all better?”

Jonathan took him by the shoulders and then kissed him gently on the tip of his nose. Such surprises never ceased to amaze him.

“Did I get punched in the face for this?” Maddox complained. Truth be told, even for that, and it was still worth it. Jonathan was so close, he could feel his body heat.

He held his breath as Jonathan angled his head and kissed the corner of his mouth. Then, he moved slowly to take his lips, and it was even sweeter than before. Maddox opened his mouth slowly, cautiously, and then a naughty tongue flickered over his lips and darted inside, teasing him.

The only other point where their bodies made contact was where Jonathan held him by the shoulders, but it was enough. Maddox could feel the world starting to spin around him like a fun merry-go-round as he closed his eyes.

Jonathan was kissing him, and it was beyond everything he had ever experienced. It wasn’t even about sex, or not only about it, because the way Jonathan brushed his lips over his mouth, so unhurriedly that it hurt, was filled not only with sexual want but something else.

Something that tasted like nothing else Maddox had ever tasted before. Was it because he was a boy, and he had never kissed one before? Or was it because it was simply Jonathan?

He found it hard to open his eyes and accept that it was over when Jonathan moved away.

“Better now?”

Maddox smiled. “Definitely.”

“Then off you go. Call me if there’s anything you need.”

He could make so many jokes about other boys Jonathan must have kissed or that ‘anything’ leaving the door open for sexual innuendos. But Maddox just nodded and let himself be guided to the door.

Once outside, he broke into a sprint. His feet had wings all of a sudden, and he felt as if he were drunk for the first time in his life.

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“What happened to you?” That was a very startled Kane, who had both hands filled with beer bottles and was just heading to join the others on the sofa to watch a game.

Maddox grinned and sighed. “Something wonderful.”

“Wonderful? You look like you got into a fight.”

Maddox hiked up the stairs. He couldn’t stop and entertain Kane and his curiosity right now because he needed to reach his room, throw himself on the bed, and dream wide-eyed of how amazing Jonathan was and the sweetness of his kiss.

## *Chapter Seven - Kiss And Tell*

Jonathan wished there was a magic trick to stop the hammering of a heart that didn't want to slow down even once he was inside the small suite he shared with Ray. He pressed his back against the door and tried to control his breathing. He had gone and kissed Maddox Kingsley! Of all the students on campus, he had to go for the guy who was the worst choice he could make.

He pressed a hand to his chest and breathed out. At the time, he had been so cool and in control, thinking that he would pay Maddox back for the sudden attack on his person with a small surprise of his own. One that didn't involve punching the guy in the nose, he thought and winced at the memory.

What kind of kick-ass fighter was Maddox if he couldn't block a slow hit like that? Jonathan knew he was no boxer or MMA aficionado, so landing that punch had taken him completely by surprise. It had been a knee-jerk reaction, too, as he had been so tense the moment Maddox had walked through the door. That, especially, worried him since he had never known himself as an aggressive individual. Apparently, Maddox had the remarkable ability to bring out the worst in him. In the moment, he had thought the guy would call it a prank and laugh at him, and --

But the kiss... The kiss had been amazing. Jonathan banged his head against the door and groaned. Maddox's full lips felt as good as they looked, sweet marshmallow pillows that one could indulge in for hours while slowly going mad. And when Jonathan, too sure of himself, had dared to sneak his tongue inside and have a taste... That should have been the moment when he realized that he had gone utterly, hopelessly insane.

How was he supposed to forget about Maddox now? How was he supposed to kiss another boy and not compare the way their lips touched to that mind-blowing kiss?

Maddox was such a tough act to follow that Jonathan had no idea what to do but stay there, pinned to the door like an old coat, and ponder over the miserable fate he had tailored for himself with his own two hands and through no one else's fault.

"Ah, you're home?"

Ray's voice woke him from his self-flagellation. His roommate's hair was a mess, and he looked like he had just woken up himself.

"Were you already asleep? So early?"

Ray stretched and yawned. "What can I say? Certain study materials are the best sleeping pills. Just for the record, I wanted to surprise you and have dinner ready, but I forgot to order takeout."

That was as far as Ray's abilities to handle dinner went, and Jonathan was thankful for his forgetting to order. As much as Ray insisted that he needed to repay Jonathan for always cooking for two, eating garbage, no matter how tasty, wasn't high on his list. Plus, it was cheaper to have

something made at home, as he had come to learn during his months spent alone and away from his family. Anyone from his 'before' life would barely recognize him in an apron reading the nutritional facts of each ingredient that went into the pot, especially since he came from a family that considered cooking something reserved for the help.

"That's all right. I'll throw something together in no time."

Ray followed him as he took off his bag. "I stocked the fridge and the cupboard."

"God help us then," Jonathan joked. "How do you like your cereal, Ray? Poached or deep fried?"

Ray giggled. "Come on, I'm not that bad. And I'm starting to learn a thing or two from you. Like how to hold a fork."

"Give me a minute to change. And I have no idea what you mean by that."

"You know." Ray made a vague gesture. "Like with elegance."

Jonathan just shook his head and disappeared into his room.

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"So, have you gone on a date with Connor already?" Ray watched Jonathan like a hawk as he stuffed his mouth like he hadn't eaten in a month. Seeing how skinny he was, Jonathan wondered where all that food went. Ray had a metabolism that could make supermodels on all continents go green with envy. As one would expect, he wasn't appreciative of this so-called gift.

Jonathan hesitated. He hadn't had the heart to tell Ray that he didn't find Connor attractive. "No, not yet."

"Hmm, did you at least bump into him tonight?"

Jonathan frowned in thought. "No, why would you ask that?"

Ray gestured at him with a dangerously full spoon. "I don't know, but your eyes are all shiny, and you look happy."

Jonathan could feel his cheeks getting slightly warm. Was he that transparent? The little game he was playing with Maddox was getting out of hand if people could easily tell something was going on.

"I just rushed here from the library. The fresh air must have made my eyes water."

Ray examined him with narrow eyes. "Right. So, you're not the kind to kiss and tell. I can respect that, man."

Jonathan let out a small breath.

“But I’m your roommate and bestie,” Ray continued. “One of these days, you need to fill me in, because boy, this thing you have going with Connor, must be pretty intense.”

Jonathan stared at Ray nonplussed. “What do you mean?”

“You know, one day you’re blue, the next tickled pink.”

Jonathan couldn’t repress a small laugh. “I have no idea what you mean.”

Ray sighed and then rested his chin in his palm with a dreamy look on his face. “I wish I was with a girl who made me feel like you’re feeling. But I suppose things like this don’t happen to people like me.”

“Do you mean having a small cold the other day, aka your definition of blue, and allergies acting up, aka my shiny eyes?” Jonathan asked, hoping that Ray would let it go, at least this time.

No chance of that. Ray grinned and then winked at him. “One day, JJ, you’re going to kiss and tell. And I’ll be here for you, as your bestie.”

“A very nosy bestie,” Jonathan pointed out.

“Hey, if I don’t have a love life, at least I can live vicariously through yours,” Ray said matter-of-factly.

“You’d practically be living a gay man’s love life,” Jonathan said and grabbed the plates.

“So? Love is love,” Ray replied and beat Jonathan to the sink, where he took the dirty plates from him and began washing them like he was serving time in Satan’s kitchen.

Jonathan didn’t mind Ray’s enthusiastic nature most of the time, but there was no way in hell he could admit to him, or anyone for that matter, that he was falling for the resident bad boy like a complete naïf.

Wait, he stopped, was that what he was doing?

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“This Saturday, it’s on us,” Dex announced as they sat around the kitchen table with beers in front of them. “I’ll make sure we have all the booze we need. You three will be in charge of the rest.”

“I’ll handle the snacks,” Kane replied right away.

“I’ll bring the strippers,” Rusty said in the most innocent manner possible.

Both Dex and Kane stared at him until Rusty grimaced and looked away. “You’re no fun. Should I bring some nuns, then?”

“Did you buy something weird from the sex shop again?” Kane narrowed his eyes as he examined their mutual friend. “I’m sure your definition of nuns cannot be found in any dictionary.”

“Yes, it can,” Rusty retorted. “The dictionary of sex.”

“You’re not bringing anyone,” Kane decided. “You’ll be the DJ.”

“Boring,” Rusty said and pouted.

“So that means that I’m the promoter of our little event,” Maddox said once his roommates were finished shooting daggers at Rusty from their eyes.

As the most popular guy in their group, he always made sure practically everyone attended their events. However, this time, he had a special guest in mind. Jonathan was avoiding him again. In all truth, since their majors were so different, they didn’t have any classes together except Statistics, but that didn’t mean the feeling he was being avoided was farfetched. Jonathan must be incredibly shy, Maddox had decided, and he would supply a cure for that as soon as he could, which was exactly what this party would do.

“Are we going to meet the mysterious girl who keeps on breaking your heart?” Kane asked.

Well, Maddox pondered for a moment. His homies needed to learn about it sooner or later, and this moment was as good as any. “Have you guys ever crushed on a dude? It’s for research purposes,” he added quickly.

Too late. His question made his three friends stop and look at him with curious eyes. It was easy to tell Kane was dying to start asking questions himself while Dex examined him all-knowingly. Rusty was as clueless as ever, and he was probably considering Maddox’s question for real if he were to conclude anything from the focused frown knitting his dark blond eyebrows together.

Dex spoke first. “I think I might have crushed on our math teacher in sixth grade. Or, I just fell in love with math. Hard to tell. I was pretty confused at the time,” he said with a shrug and then burst into laughter as Kane elbowed him hard.

“Thank you for your input, Mr. Solomon,” Maddox said and pretended to push imaginary glasses up his nose. “How about you, Mr. Dubois?”

Kane seemed eager to add his thoughts. “So, you want to know if we’ve had, like gay experiences?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, when I was ten, my sister’s girlfriends dressed me up like a girl, and one of them kissed me. Does that count as gay enough? It was practically a lesbian kiss.”

“Not by far. Sit down, Mr. Dubois. And by next time, you better learn the difference between lady parts and dude parts, ‘cause damn, you’re even more confused now than Dex in sixth grade learning about equations and thinking them sexy.”

They all snickered except for Rusty, who seemed so deep in thought that Maddox was starting to wonder what could be on his mind. It was good that everyone was taking this thing so well. His news wouldn’t come as such a big bombshell then.

He didn’t have to repeat his question for the third time.

“I’m into dudes in latex,” Rusty said with confidence and grinned broadly.

Maddox didn’t have to look at his other two friends to know that they were as shocked as he was. Rusty was their resident kinkster, but that kind of confession blew anything else out of the water.

“What?” Rusty stared back at them. “I just like the costume. You know, complete with cat ears and a tail.”

Dex blinked a few times and raised one arm, pointing at Rusty like he was some lunatic, which wasn’t that far from the truth, seeing what came out of his mouth or his bedroom regularly.

“Wait, wait, wait, is he talking about cat boys?”

“Yeah,” Rusty replied like it was the most natural thing in the world to admit in front of this friends. “What’s wrong with that?”

Kane smacked his forehead and groaned. “You know, all this shit would sound a lot less weird if it were Catwoman getting you into latex and cat ears and whatnot.”

“And tails,” Rusty corrected him. “And what’s so weird about it?”

Dex snorted. “Maybe the fact that you’re not gay. Not even bi. Wait, do you have something to confess, Rusty?”

Rusty froze, and his eyes ping-ponged between his friends frantically for two heartbeats. “Not me, Maddox has something to say.” He pointed his finger at Maddox to divert everyone’s attention from him.

Now, three pairs of eyes were on him. His friends were waiting, so Maddox took a deep breath. “I want to kiss Jonathan Hamilton,” he said in one go.

He closed his eyes and waited for chaos to be unleashed. When nothing happened, he opened one eye, then the other. His friends were just staring at him in utter shock.

“Weren’t you in hate with him or something?” That was Rusty, who, of course, had to ask something off-topic.

“We made up since then,” Maddox said with a little wave. “We’re even working on a project together for Statistics.”

Suspiciously enough, Dex and Kane were completely silent.

“Well, doesn’t anyone have anything to say?” Maddox asked, unnerved by the silence.

“Do you want to, like, give him a man hug and kiss him on the cheek like a bro?” Rusty asked.

Maddox groaned. “Anyone else got anything to say?”

Dex offered him a small smile. “All right. Just give us a little moment here, Maddox, ‘cause you dropped a real bomb on us. So, you want to kiss him?”

“Yeah,” Maddox said and shrugged. “Nothing weird about it, right?”

Dex scratched his head. “Not weird, no, just surprising. So why haven’t you kissed him already?”

Rusty mumbled something about how everyone thought his obsession with cat boys was weird, but Maddox’s sudden desire to kiss a guy wasn’t.

“I tried. He punched me in the face.”

“What?” Rusty looked ready to fight. “He punched my bro?”

“But he kissed me after,” Maddox said quickly to curb Rusty’s belligerent enthusiasm. “Which was freaking amazing.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Kane intervened. “Was that when you came home looking like someone had just punched you in the face and also happy like crazy?”

“Yep,” Maddox confirmed.

“That’s so confusing,” Rusty intervened again. “How much time passed between the punch and the kiss?”

“Dunno. Five minutes or so,” Maddox said quickly. Suddenly, he didn’t want to share how Jonathan had offered him his t-shirt, or called him ‘baby’, or kissed his nose. That stuff was pretty private.

“And you’re crushing on him from that alone?” Dex asked.

“We also jerked off together once,” he replied.

Kane began scratching his head in a dramatic fashion. "That's one weird order of business. Is this like an unwritten rule for gay relationships?" He turned toward Dex.

"Hey, don't look at me," Dex said and raised his hands. "My dads have only had an awkward talk about sex with me, like all parents do. I was definitely happier to learn on my own rather than sit down with them ever again."

"Wait," Rusty jumped into the conversation again, "first you two jerked off, then he punched you, and then he kissed you? Man, you're making me envious. That's one weird example of rough trade."

"The jerk off stuff didn't happen at the same time as the rest," Maddox explained.

That only appeared to make Rusty even more confused than before. "So, are you gay now?" he asked.

Maddox shrugged. "I have no idea. But, man, I need to kiss Jonathan again."

"So, you're not my best gay friend? Or my gay best friend? Or --"

"Rusty, Rusty," Kane took their confused friend by the shoulders, "don't burn all your brain cells out in one place. Maddox is just figuring things out. Right?"

Maddox nodded. "Yeah, that's pretty much it. So, I'm going to invite him to our party if that's okay with you."

"Sure thing," Dex said promptly. "But, Maddox, this thing... You sure?"

"Totally. Never been surer."

However, he wasn't sure what the surreptitious glance between Kane and Dex was supposed to mean.

"Okay, just don't toy with him if you're not," Dex said. "What I learned from my dads is that boys are not that different from girls when it comes to stuff like that. They can get hurt just the same."

"I don't intend to hurt him," Maddox replied.

"Then how about that rough trade thing?" Rusty asked. "Or are you a guy who likes to get hit?"

Kane gave Rusty a tight hug and squeezed him until protests emerged. "Rusty, my man, you just need another beer, right?"

"Sure." Rusty wasn't the kind to refuse that. "Can you let go of me now?"

Kane shook his head. "Not until you shut your mouth and stop asking Maddox weird questions."

“All right. Just one thing. Make sure you decide on a safe word first, Maddox,” Rusty said. “Don’t make it too long, though.”

Dex snorted, and Kane groaned, but Maddox was strangely curious. “Why shouldn’t it be too long?”

“Because you might not be able to squeeze ‘winner winner chicken dinner’ in while you have your -- you know what? Just pick a word from the dictionary, and you’ll be cool.”

At least, it looked like Rusty had a slight sense of self-preservation and wasn’t going to share with him all the strange sex practices he was indulging in.

“So, we’re cool, right?” Maddox asked his friends again. “No teasing and all that.”

Dex snorted. “For real? This is the juiciest thing since Rusty forgot to tell us about his special weekend with that Amanda chick, and we came home to find them licking whipped cream from each other’s bodies.”

Rusty groaned. “I was sick for days. I’ll never have whipped cream again in my life.”

Kane squeezed Rusty in his arms again. “Someone needs to understand moderation. You two weren’t supposed to cover yourselves in it up to your eyeballs.”

Dex snickered. “They looked like two very weird ghosts.”

“Oh, yeah?” Rusty bristled. “And I suppose you were the ghostbusters, then?”

Kane kissed Rusty on the head and released him. “That wasn’t really an insult, Rusty. You need to work on upping your insult more. Sure thing, Maddox, bring your special friend to the party. I’m definitely curious to see how this plays out.”

“All right. Dex?” Maddox turned toward his other friend.

“All fine by me, of course. Just don’t let him break your heart or something.”

“Hey, I thought you were worried earlier that I might do that to him.”

Dex shrugged. “I don’t know. I thought about it a little, and the dude looks like a heartbreaker to me.”

“What’s that even supposed to mean?” Maddox asked.

“Yeah, really,” Rusty joined him. “What makes you think this Jonathan dude’s a heartbreaker?”

“Maybe the fact that he’s throwing random punches? Maybe he’s a nose breaker, and I just got it all wrong?” Dex offered and winked at Maddox, making him groan. So the teasing was starting already.

“Thank you, guys, you’re all awesome,” Maddox said.

“Wait, why aren’t you asking me, too?” Rusty complained.

“Okay, do you have anything against it?”

“No,” Rusty replied promptly. “Was that kiss with tongue or without?”

“I’m not going to kiss and tell, punk,” Maddox said defensively.

“You just did, though,” Rusty pointed out and smiled broadly. “It was definitely with tongue.” For some reason, this asshole of a friend of his found that extremely funny. “Guys, Jonathan Hamilton put his tongue inside Maddox’s mouth.”

“Oh, gawd, you’re really starting to pull my leg, aren’t you? Couldn’t you wait until after the party or something?”

“Why? What do you intend to do then?” Rusty asked, and his grin grew even wider if that was possible. “Are you going to --”

“Kane, please, restrain Rusty ‘cause I want to punch him in the face,” Maddox warned.

This time, Rusty didn’t allow Kane to catch him and moved deftly out of the way. Maddox shook his head and left, leaving Kane in charge of chasing Rusty around the table.

Well, that had gone pretty well, teasing aside. Now, he only needed to convince the guest of honor to drop by.

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He wasn’t avoiding Maddox. No, definitely, he wasn’t doing that, but each time he saw the guy around campus, his feet commanded him to move in the opposite direction. So what? Jonathan didn’t want to dwell on things too much, especially since he had a lot of studying to do, and he also needed to work to support himself.

Those were excuses, of course. The real reason lay hidden under many wrappings and layers, and Jonathan had no intention to start digging for it. Maddox was a player, a womanizer, a straight dude, and therefore, on all accounts, an absolute ‘no’.

It didn’t matter that he had the most beautiful eyes Jonathan had ever seen in his life, or that his lips were amazingly sweet, or that he knew how to make anyone laugh with just a single word.

Who was he kidding? Maddox was an amazing guy, head to toes, minus that thing with the illegal fights, of course. Jonathan had yet to get to know him well, and he didn’t need to get to know him well because then he would only want to get to know him better, and then for them to grow closer, and then –

Ray elbowed him hard, interrupting the train of thought that kept on torturing him while he pretended to sit on the grass and enjoy the last pleasant days of autumn by reading arid study materials for the next class.

“JJ, Maddox Kingsley is walking straight toward us,” his roommate whispered.

It was too late to make a run for it. Jonathan raised his eyes, trying hard to focus on anything else but that confident strut, those broad shoulders, that sexy hip swing that should have looked awkward for a dude, and yet didn't. Yes, he was trying.

The least he could do was to school his face into a neutral expression. Seeing how much practice he had in that respect, it wasn't hard, and that was his saving grace.

However, Maddox only acknowledged him with a slight nod, much to his surprise, and then began talking to Ray.

“Ray, right?”

“Yes,” Ray replied in a meek voice, as if some A-list celebrity had just agreed to give him an autograph.

“Hi, I'm Maddox.”

Jonathan watched in complete disbelief as Ray stood awkwardly to shake hands with Maddox. How the hell was he supposed to interpret that?

“Listen, me and my buddies are throwing a party this Saturday. I was wondering if you'd like to come.”

Ray stood there, still shaking Maddox's hand, smiling with an elated look on his face. Maddox grinned at him and wiggled his eyebrows. “Well? Would you?”

“Yes, yes,” Ray replied enthusiastically, and after shaking Maddox's hand one last time, he finally let the guy go.

“All right, it's on.” Maddox winked at Ray and then began walking away under Jonathan's completely flabbergasted stare. “Oh,” he threw over his shoulder, “and feel free to bring your roommate along. See you guys there!”

Jonathan didn't have any words left. He was speechless. Ray dropped down by his side and then grabbed him by the shoulders and began shaking him. “JJ, Maddox Kingsley just talked to me! He invited us to a party! Can you believe it?”

“Yes, I can, since I was right here the whole time,” Jonathan replied. “Now would you please stop shaking me?”

Ray let go of him only to throw his arms in the air and shout victoriously. "I'm no longer invisible! Popularity, here I come! How many days are there until Saturday? Only two! What should I wear? Oh, no, I have nothing to wear!"

"Ray, Ray, calm down. God, stop being such a groupie. People will start doubting I'm the gay guy in this friendship if you react like this just because Maddox Kingsley talked to you. You will go to the party, and you will be yourself, choice of clothes and all."

"No way can I be that," Ray refused his advice outright. "I'm boring, and my clothes are weird."

"Don't overreact. And we've been to a party already this semester, haven't we? This one is no different. You'll be fine on your own."

"On my own? No way. JJ, you need to come with me," Ray said.

"What? He only said that you should feel free to bring me along, not that you must."

"No. I'm pretty sure you're my ticket to this party."

Jonathan scoffed. "Ray, for real. Maddox wouldn't slam the door in your face if you went alone. And I'm certain the entire campus will be there. I'm not even sure why he felt he had to make such a formal invitation."

"Obviously, because he knows you're a popular guy, too, and popular guys hang out together," Ray explained.

That was surely not it, but Jonathan couldn't tell Ray about the whole thing with Maddox, which he still had serious trouble wrapping his head around as it was. "You keep forgetting that Maddox invited you, not me. And I was right here."

Ray shrugged. It looked like nothing could burst his bubble. "He invited both of us. Maybe he didn't talk to you because you're intimidating."

"Me? Intimidating? How?"

"You know. It's like you could freeze someone on the spot with a single look."

"That's certainly not true," Jonathan protested.

"And you hold your head high like an aristocrat. Good thing I don't believe in royalty," Ray said matter-of-factly, "or I would have been afraid to talk to you."

"You don't say," Jonathan commented dryly, more and more surprised by Ray's speech. "So Maddox Kingsley, the king of hookups and illegal fights, was afraid to talk to me just now."

“Could be,” Ray said with a smile. “JJ, you’ll come to this party, too. No way you’re ditching me.”

Jonathan groaned and tried to return to his studying. But as he turned his head, he couldn’t help noticing, at a fair distance from him, Maddox and his group of friends chatting happily with each other and conversing with everyone passing by.

As if it were bloody magic, Maddox looked right at him and caught his eye. He made a small gesture as if he was smoothing down the sleeves of his t-shirt and then waved at him.

Jonathan buried his face in the open book in front of him and wished, for the umpteenth time since he had met Maddox Kingsley, that he didn’t have a heart that could react like that each time the guy did as little as lift his pinkie.

## *Chapter Eight – Three Mistakes*

Jonathan had to be thankful for small mercies as the class he had together with Maddox went without any notable incidents, which meant that the guy hadn't thrown knowing looks in his direction or done anything to appear that he was even aware of them being in the same room. Now he was starting to believe that he had done nothing but overreact lately. That kiss had been nothing but some sort of a joke, after all, with Maddox challenging him to do it, and him... well, doing it. It didn't mean anything. Given Maddox's experience, he must have been kissed thousands of times by people with a lot more to offer than Jonathan.

No, not people in general, but girls in particular, he told himself. Actually, he had no idea. Maddox could go around kissing guys at random, for all he knew. Only for him that moment had been special, and he was just blowing things out of proportion like a teenager experiencing the frissons of a first love.

Jonathan liked to believe he was way past that stage, thank you very much. Therefore, he had no reason not to accompany Ray to the party and pretend he was a part of the campus life like everyone else. Maddox would just play around with some girl, like he usually did, no matter what Sunny Hill Xpress kept talking about, and Jonathan would play the wallflower for as long as it was polite to be there and then return to his humble quarters.

The most annoying part of it all wasn't how things played out, which was entirely for the best, but how disappointed he felt. He couldn't repress that annoying feeling if it killed him, and he was getting a bit tired to be so guarded all the time just so that he could keep any thoughts of Maddox out of his mind.

Ray was already bouncing off the walls with excitement, as the hour at which the party started was drawing near. He had tried four different hairstyles that Jonathan had found strangely similar since Ray couldn't discipline his mop of hair if an army of hairstylists were at his beck and call. Then the wardrobe ordeal had come, and Jonathan had used all the persuasion he could muster to convince his roommate that he just needed to dress comfortably to enjoy the party.

"Is this how you're going?" Ray's eyes grew wide when he looked at him.

For no particular reason, Jonathan had opted for the same light sweater he had worn at the time of the kiss. In the evenings, the temperatures were starting to drop, so it was a reasonable choice. "Yes. What is wrong with it?"

"It's like you're dressed for class, not a party. So conservative," Ray commented and shook his head.

"You somehow still have the wrong idea about this party. It's not the country club, Ray."

"My point exactly. The only thing you're missing is a tie."

Well, if it had happened that he wore one that time, he would have picked a tie, too, right now. Was he being sentimental? No, he just enjoyed clothes he could feel comfortable in, unlike Ray. “Stop pestering me already. Look who turned into a party animal overnight, giving lessons to others on how to dress and all. Let’s just go already so that you can see that it’s just another party.”

“Just another party,” Ray mirrored his last words with a moan. “You must have been to some really cool ones before coming to Sunny Hill, right?”

“Not really, no,” Jonathan said abruptly.

Ray stopped brushing his hair for the tenth time and turned toward him. “Was it that bad? Before? You never talk about it, but I feel like it was.”

Jonathan just threw Ray a look that needed no explanation. He didn’t want to talk to anyone about it, and it wasn’t like he had something against his roommate in particular. But he preferred if that particular sore spot in his life was forgotten, and he was not one to raise the dead, figuratively speaking. The Jonathan Hamilton from before was no more, which meant that he was supposed to be done and over being starry-eyed, naïve, and in love with the wrong person.

That thought kept buzzing around his brain. If he were falling in love with Maddox, it would be so, so bad. What the hell was happening to his resolution that he would just find a nice gay guy, someone out and uncomplicated, who would have no reason to hide? Apparently, it was enough for a pair of lovely gray eyes to look his way, and he was turned into a ditzy character incapable of controlling himself or his feelings.

“I get it,” Ray said, interrupting his musings. “But just know that whenever you’re ready to talk about it, I’ll be right here.”

“Thank you,” Jonathan said and allowed Ray to embrace him shortly. “That’s good to know. Now let’s just go to that party so that you can get it out of your system.”

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Maddox was so restless he could barely do more than exchange a few words here and there with people he had personally invited. His eyes kept darting toward the door, as it appeared that Jonathan enjoyed testing his patience by being fashionably late.

Dex slapped his shoulder and then grabbed him to pull him aside. “Maddox, it’s not that I don’t enjoy watching you fret like a schoolboy waiting for his crush to come through the door, but even I, despite enjoying teasing you the most, need to tell you to chill. It’s torture merely looking at you fidgeting like you have something up your butt.”

“I don’t think he’s coming.”

“It’s early. Not even half the people are here, and Kane is still debating if crackers and chips should be mixed in the same bowl.”

“I don’t think so,” Maddox offered his input. “I mean, just tell him to place them in separate bowls, and get the biggest ones. People are going to start feeding like pigs after a few drinks.”

“Ah, nice to hear you talking about other things. Now, move away from the door and mingle a little like the most popular boy on campus that you are.”

Maddox was about to follow Dex’s advice when the door opened to let in another stream of new comers. And behind them, he noticed right away, Jonathan Hamilton walked in, and suddenly, the entire universe, except for one special guy, disappeared.

He strutted over to him, deciding not to let him out of his sight for one moment. Jonathan might choose to walk back home any moment since he didn’t appear to be the kind to party.

“Hey, Maddox,” someone called and put himself between him and Jonathan.

“Hey, man,” he replied and turned his attention to the intruder with reluctance. That was Ray, Jonathan’s roommate, and Maddox had already forgotten the ruse he had used to get the most important person to attend his party. “Glad to see you could make it.”

Gawd, he was talking like a middle-aged soccer mom. He responded to Ray’s off the scale enthusiasm by giving him a short hug. He stared at Jonathan over the boy’s shoulder. “And that you brought your roommate with you.” His eyes bore into the beautiful ambers that were challenging him from less than one foot away.

“Yeah, not like it was easy, but I convinced him,” Ray chatted happily.

Maddox patted Ray on the back. “See the big guy there?” He pointed at Dex. “Tell him I sent you. He’ll show you around. I’ll take care of your roommate in the meantime,” he added quickly.

Dex needed to help after teasing him so much, so taking care of Ray should be on his list, Maddox decided. While Ray waved happily at Jonathan and rushed toward Dex, he no longer dallied. Without a word, he grabbed Jonathan by the hand and pulled him toward him. As much as he was a mess on the inside, he knew how to play cool on the outside. “What do you say? Do you like our house?”

“It’s big,” Jonathan admitted and pulled his hand away, a bit too slowly to not be interpreted as reluctant. “And nice. I mean, I suppose. I just entered.”

“Let me show you my room,” Maddox said abruptly and gestured with his chin for Jonathan to follow him.

Jonathan frowned slightly and threw a cautious look around. Loud music broke out all of a sudden, as Rusty began taking his DJ role seriously. The already gathered crowd cheered. Maddox took Jonathan firmly by the arm and dragged him up the stairs, without allowing him one single moment to become indecisive.

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Jonathan couldn't stop the butterflies in his stomach from doing somersaults. The moment he had stepped inside the house where the party was held, Maddox had seized him and now, by force of fate or circumstance, they were alone in his room. To give himself a moment to gather his thoughts, he looked around. The room was neater than he would have thought, and the bookshelves were loaded with books. He took a step toward them and began reading titles at random. Maddox's bed was right in the middle, but he wanted to avoid looking at it, as if an inanimate object such as that could jump at him and give him a scare.

"So, what do you think?" Maddox asked while leaning lazily against the door.

He was wearing a white t-shirt and washed out jeans, both glued to his perfect body like usual. At least, the sleeves had stayed down, Jonathan noticed with a bit of satisfaction. "You have some really great titles in here."

"If you ever want to borrow anything, don't hesitate to ask."

"I work at the library, remember?" Jonathan said with a small laugh.

He sounded so awkward, so out of his depth, and the next thing he truly needed to consider was how to find a way back to the party and away from that dangerous boy and his dazzling smile.

His first mistake was looking. Maddox cocked his head and blinked slowly, while his full lips stretched even more. Something about how he did that made Jonathan think of a tomcat preparing to devour a bowl of cream.

"So, what is it like to suck cock?"

Jonathan blinked rapidly and stood there, in shock. Maddox was grinning and now it felt like he was actually blocking the door, trapping his guest inside. "Wow, what an ice breaker," he commented, as soon as he found his words.

Maddox shrugged. "Well, you were talking about books, and that's not why I brought you here."

"Oh, really?" Jonathan crossed his arms. "I hope you didn't bring me here to suck your cock."

Maddox stared at him nonplussed and then started laughing. "Oh, screw me sideways, you're so easy to rile up. No, no, I was just wondering because I've never sucked cock, and in life, it's good to learn new things from others."

Jonathan swallowed thickly and made a second mistake, this time by looking at Maddox's beautiful lips and imagine them briefly –

He shook his head. "Well, if we're just discussing for the sake of knowledge, well, I can't say if I do enjoy it." Finally, his cool was returning to him, and if Maddox thought he would be easy to tease, he wouldn't make it a walk in the park.

Maddox's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Really? So, let me get this straight, you've never slept with a guy, and you don't even like sucking cock. What exactly makes you think you're gay then?"

Jonathan smiled affably. "Well, that's simple. Right now, the only thing I'm thinking about is how much I want to kiss you."

The moment the words left his mouth, he knew he had just made his third mistake. It was supposed to be mere teasing! Maddox grinned and walked over to him, his walk confident as usual. "I see," he said and stopped inches away from him.

Jonathan began searching frantically for a way out. But he was caught between the bed on the right, the desk on the left, and the bookshelves were dangerously close to his back. If he took just one step backward, he would bump into them.

And, of course, Maddox was blocking the only way out. "That's quite a coincidence," he purred, "because I was thinking about the exact same thing."

"Do you want to kiss yourself?" Jonathan made a lame attempt at a joke. "In the mirror? I can't really blame you. I'd probably think the same if I looked like you."

He was babbling, turning with each word into a more confused mess, but it was hard to keep his mind going steady when Maddox was so, so close. Jonathan stopped breathing and was about to close his eyes and let the inevitable happen when the other spoke.

"Just to get something clear, if I kiss you, will you punch me before or after? Give a man the chance to prepare."

Jonathan burst into laughter, most of the tension in his shoulders suddenly gone. "I'm not going to punch you ever again. That was so stupid of me I don't know what I can do to make it right."

"I see," Maddox said, "and I'll take your word for it. So, you won't punch me if I do this?"

Jonathan had no time to react as Maddox grabbed him and pushed him onto the bed. In a split second, he was trapped between strong thighs and his shoulders were pinned to the bed. Above him, Maddox's pretty eyes were burning. "Well? Are you sure you're not going to do anything?"

Jonathan just nodded and licked his lips.

“Good,” Maddox said matter-of-factly, and the next moment, those maddeningly soft lips were on his, making each and every one of his dreams from the last week come true.

Dreams were one thing; reality was way, way better. The first time, he hadn’t allowed Maddox to kiss him properly, and then he had been the instigator. But now, he was getting a front row seat to an outstanding performance.

First, his lips were slowly taken, despite the quickness of the initial attack. It looked like sometime, overnight, his bottom lip must have turned into a most delicious dish because Maddox appeared to be fixated on it, and especially on devouring it with tiny nibbles. Just as he was about to protest, Maddox switched angles and took his mouth completely.

His shoulders were no longer pinned to the bed; however, his head was caged between strong arms, and he could detect the other’s pleasant smell, of just washed skin and something deeper. Jonathan chased the scent, lost in sensations, while Maddox began pushing his tongue inside, challenging his to come out and play.

Never before had he been the kind to step back from a sweet fight like this. Thus, he started giving back, enjoying every second of hearing Maddox’s moans triggered by each of his actions.

“Fuck.” Maddox stopped for a moment, and they stared at each other, breathless and far from satisfied. “You’re one hell of a kisser, Jonathan Hamilton.”

“You’re not bad yourself, Maddox Kingsley,” he replied in kind.

“Then we should go back to it, right?”

Jonathan nodded. This moment was real and unreal at the same time; it happened in a bubble, away from all his disappointments and fears. The only regret he had right now was that soon, it would be over, and he would have to return to drab reality.

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He smelled the same way he had smelled that time; he even wore the same clothes. And his mouth, his mouth was everything, better than he remembered. Maddox had always enjoyed kissing the girls he had been with, but this was different in a way that was making him tremble with excitement from head to toes. Maybe only the very first kiss in his entire life could compare to this. And seeing this was the second time they were kissing, all the signals that this thing was special, no matter what definition could describe it, were lighting up.

He loved how firm yet still soft Jonathan’s lips felt. He loved how that mouth, usually set in a straight line, opened at the mere touch of his lips, welcoming him inside. And most of all, he loved the tongue that wrapped around his, teasing it, tasting it, giving its all. It was maddening to kiss Jonathan. It was pure pleasure and something more than that.

Too bad they had to breathe, but it was rewarding to discover that he wasn't the only one out of breath. For a few moments, they stared at each other, saying nothing.

From up close, Jonathan was even more attractive. Yeah, those amber eyes were amazing, and Maddox felt like he could drown in them with no regrets. The slightly flushed skin looked good on him, too, and made him look human and full of life, no matter how much Jonathan wanted to project a cool collected image of himself everywhere he went. It made Maddox wonder if that was caused by a rigid upbringing or if Jonathan had something to hide and chose to do so behind a façade made of stone.

The lips betrayed him the most. They were full, so kissable that they could drive anyone who dared to look too close mad, absolutely mad. Maddox leaned in for another kiss; he was far from finished, and who knew when he would have Jonathan pinned to the bed like this again.

“Shouldn't you go back to the party?”

The question stopped him midway. “I don't care that much about it.”

“But you're supposed to be its star, aren't you?”

Maddox grimaced. “Do you want to go back to the party, Jonathan? 'Cause that would be a low blow.”

“Really? How so? And you know I only punch above the belt,” Jonathan said and his eyes twinkled.

Oh, yeah, there was so much mischief in there. Maddox cared for absolutely nothing else in the world but how to find the key to the mystery that was this beautiful guy lying underneath him. “Ha, ha, very funny. And you were saying that you would never hit me again.”

“Well, give me a serious enough reason, and I might,” Jonathan teased him.

“That's not nice. I don't like being punched, and I'm not searching for a safe word.”

Damn Rusty and his crazy ideas!

Jonathan frowned slightly. “A safe word? I don't intend to spank you, either, just so you know.”

Maddox could feel his skin getting warm at the mention of that. Cool looking Jonathan having a dude bent over his lap, one of his elegant hands resting right above the curve of his nice ass...

All right, that was just making him jealous. And horny, at the same time. Maddox grounded his crotch into Jonathan, making the other let out a small, unmistakable grunt. Yeah, yeah, he was not the only one getting desperate here, and that was a good thing. “So,” he drawled, “have you ever spanked someone?”

The amber eyes blinked prettily. “No, of course not.”

“Would you like to?”

“Again, the answer is ‘no’.” The amber eyes lit up with alarm, but not the panicky kind.

Maddox didn’t really have the time to unpack the significance of that look. “Why not?”

“Seriously? Because... I don’t know, I don’t see myself as that kind of person.”

“Violent, you mean? Because you definitely were violent toward me when I tried to kiss you.”

Jonathan groaned. “I’m really sorry about that punch. I don’t even know what came over me. I thought you were pulling a prank on me, and next thing I knew, you’d start laughing.”

Maddox scoffed. “Are you serious? I only kiss someone when I want to do it for real. I’d never do that. What exactly makes people think that I’m a prankster?”

“People? So it’s not just me,” Jonathan concluded.

“Well,” Maddox said, now irritated, “I’m not a prankster. Everything I do, I do with honesty. So, why wouldn’t you spank me?”

The question seemed to take both of them by surprise. Maddox hadn’t intended to phrase it like that, but he just couldn’t stand the idea of Jonathan fondling some rando’s butt when he could fondle his.

Jonathan got red in the face. “I was just joking about even punching you ever again, no matter what you’d do. How did we get to spanking?”

“Omigod, you’re such a virgin.” Maddox changed tack and chose to tease Jonathan some more. He didn’t want to think of Jonathan’s hands wandering anywhere below his belt right now because he needed to prepare better for that first. And he had never been into the crazy stuff Rusty was into, so his mind was just polluted with that kind of crap for no reason at all. On top of it all, Jonathan blushing like crazy was a sight to behold, and he wanted more of it.

“Well, I am, and I’m not denying it. Since you’re not, and you’re obviously the more experienced, I see it as a low blow on your part to tease me over my lack of knowledge on the matter.”

“Wow, do you ever breathe between words?”

“Not when you’re around.”

“Damn, tough. Because I’m not going to let you breathe anyway.”

Maddox took Jonathan's mouth, covering it completely with his. Even that was amazing, how their lips fit together, how they knew how to angle their heads just right, and how their tongues began their performance like they were lifetime dance partners. And that mouth was sweet, sweeter than everything else Maddox had ever had in his life. He could drink and eat from it forever; he was sure of it.

And as much as Jonathan had tried to keep him away otherwise, by avoiding him around campus, and trying to send him back to the party, he kissed back with everything he had.

They were even making noises as they kissed each other deeper. Maddox had to up the ante or he would go nuts, so he snuck one hand under Jonathan's sweater and began fighting to take his undershirt out of his pants. As one would expect from someone like him, he didn't give up until his fingers made contact with naked skin.

Damn, that was something. Maddox had no idea there could be guys so silky smooth to the touch. Jonathan's skin was something glorious, and he was dying to see it again, but since his mouth was busy and he had no intention of interrupting that contact, it would have to wait.

Jonathan shivered under him, as Maddox snuck his hand higher, curious in his explorations. He could feel the ridges of a toned abdomen, although they weren't as prominent as in an athlete, and then his hand found and followed the contour of a defined pec. Jonathan arched off the bed as Maddox brushed his thumb over a hardened nipple.

A soft moan followed, and Maddox loved how it reverberated inside his mouth, as Jonathan looked completely unwilling to stop kissing, too. Without even realizing it, he was moving his hips against the other's body, dry humping like he was still in his first year of high school.

He needed to undress Jonathan and have him lie completely naked on his bed so that he could satisfy all his curiosity. And they were both well beyond the age when dry humping could still be considered acceptable, so they needed to work on that, too.

Just as he was about to put his plan into action, a loud knock on the door startled them. Jonathan froze under him, but this time Maddox was ready and stopped him from bolting by pressing him down.

"Yeah?" he asked aggressively.

"Man, you're fucking missing the best part," Rusty yelled. "I'm just about to do karaoke. Don't tell me you're scoring already. Are you with --"

"Coming!" he yelled.

Maddox could see the entire horrid accident that his bestie could be sometimes unfolding in front of his eyes in slow motion. He jumped off the bed in the blink of an eye and rushed to the door.

He opened it only enough so that he could sneak outside and interrupt his roomie before he would blurt out something stupid. “The fuck, Rusty?” he whispered angrily.

“What?” Rusty dropped his voice, too. “Is he in there? Man, you’re moving fast. Touchdown yet or --”

“Rusty, I swear to God, one day, I’m going to kick your ass so hard that we’re both going to cry by the end of it. Can you have worse timing? We were just getting into the groove, what the hell?”

No surprise there, Rusty grinned like the idiot he could be sometimes. “Okey-dokey, I’ll leave you to it. But man, you need to tell me everything.”

“Why? Do you intend to switch teams?” Maddox teased him.

“I’m just curious, ‘cause I’ve never slept with a guy.”

Maddox took Rusty by the shoulders and began pushing him toward the stairs. “Well, it’s something you need to experience by yourself, and then maybe we could exchange notes. What do you say?”

“Ah,” Rusty pouted, “then that means that I’ll never know.”

“Never say never. Now go and make sure to leave the force before I unfriend you for good.”

“What force?”

“The cockblock police.”

“Ah, so you two were already --”

“Rusty, go,” Maddox said and gave his friend one last push. The last thing he needed was for his nosy friends to embarrass Jonathan, who seemed to get red to the tips of his ears at the drop of a dime. Later, they would be allowed to talk to him and everything, but tonight, Jonathan was his.

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Jonathan cursed as he pushed his undershirt back into his pants and smoothed down his hair. What the hell was he thinking, walking into Maddox’s room and making out with him like that? That knock on the door couldn’t have been timelier. It was enough to remind him of all the sneaking about, the lies, and the deception that came with something like this.

Of course, Maddox didn’t want his friends to know. Once more, Jonathan would be nothing else but a dirty little secret, something that would fester and then blow up right in his face.

It didn't matter that it felt good. Unfortunately, all the wrong things tended to feel like that, but now he was a bit older and wiser, so he shouldn't fall into the same trap. He rubbed his cheeks, willing down the redness that he knew was there. He would walk out the door normally and pretend to talk to Maddox about some book they both read or something along those lines.

This way, no one would feel embarrassed, and what was the most important, they would both escape unscathed.

He was about to walk out the door, when Maddox entered the room.

"What was that about? Is your friend that good at karaoke?" he asked in a neutral voice.

"The total opposite."

"Ah, I see. Then you should go and cheer him up so that the crowd is not too tough on him."

Maddox stared at him, nonplussed. "Wait, what am I missing?" He was blocking the way out, but this time, Jonathan was determined to escape. "Moments ago, we were on the bed, ready to..."

"I thought you invited me to a party, and so far, I've seen little of it," Jonathan interrupted him.

Maddox opened his mouth to say something but then reconsidered. Good, that meant that they were both on the same wavelength. It was one thing to spend a few minutes showing a guy your book collection, and another to be alone for half an hour or more with him in there while there was a wild party downstairs without making rumors spread. Especially when the other guy was openly gay. It looked like Maddox understood this much, and he had no intention to appear on the cover of Sunny Hill Xpress next to some inane title about the most popular boy on campus turning to the dark side, or whatever those would-be tabloid reporters would come up with.

"Sure. Let me show you the party, then." He stepped out of the way and even held the door for him.

Jonathan tried to keep a straight face as he walked out, Maddox kept his eyes steadily on him with seemingly hundreds of questions in them.

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Fuck fuckity fuck fuck fuck! He was so going to kill Rusty the first time he had the chance. Jonathan had gotten cold feet in an instant, which, for a moment, had thrown Maddox off completely. So the guy didn't want other people to know they were fooling around. For sure, he hadn't seemed to mind while Maddox was just starting to feel him up, or when they were kissing, but during the short time needed to get rid of Rusty, Jonathan had turned from blazing hot to freezing cold and looked like nothing could easily be done to make him begin thawing.

So, getting Jonathan Hamilton to where he wanted him to be was going to be quite the quest. He would have to think up a strategy to convince him that he wanted more than a romp in the hay.

Maddox stopped just as he helped a pretty brunette with a refill. Did he want more than a romp in the hay with Jonathan?

Definitely.

“Oh, shoot,” the girl shouted, waking him up from his thoughts.

“Damn, so sorry,” he apologized, as he saw the beer overflowing the girl’s glass and pouring all over her hand.

“Don’t worry,” she said and accepted graciously a tissue which he offered right away. “Would you like to dance, Maddox?” She threw him a come-hither look.

“Not tonight,” he replied, somewhat abruptly.

She offered him an amused look. “Rumor has it that the mighty have fallen. Is it true?”

“What?” he asked and blinked a few times.

She leaned in slightly and winked at him. “Are you in love, Maddox?”

He had no idea what to say, so instead he just offered her his most stupid grin. It looked like that was enough, because she grinned back and then turned on her heels to find another victim.

## *Chapter Nine – Escape Artist*

Jonathan took advantage of Maddox's insane popularity to make himself scarce from his host's view as various people began dragging the star of the party to and fro while trying to convince him to be part of their shenanigans. Now he was free to play the wallflower, and he was fine with it. The good part was that Ray seemed to be enjoying himself a great deal as Dex, Maddox's friend, had him literally under his wing, holding him by the shoulders and plying him with alcohol. Jonathan hoped he wouldn't have to deal with a very drunk Ray afterwards, but if push came to shove, he would do his best to help his roommate.

He leaned against the wall and took in his surroundings. Moments like this made him feel a bit alone and out of touch. It was too dramatic to think that he felt older than his years, but how many people in that room could say that they had gone through an experience similar to his? All his life, he had been sheltered, allowed to feel happy and carefree, and then, suddenly, the rug had been pulled from under his feet. And his parents, their judgmental eyes, had been too much. To think that they wouldn't believe him, or at least accept that he had his own side of the story to tell. The one that belonged with the truth they hadn't cared about.

Was there anyone at the party that had felt as alone and scared as he had felt at that time? The happy faces around him told him everything he needed to know.

"We should stop meeting like this."

Connor offered him a red plastic cup and smiled. Jonathan took it and murmured his thanks. "Do you mean, when the music is too loud, and people can't hear each other?"

"You gotta admit it that it's not as loud as in other places," Connor commented and leaned against the wall to his right. "The Amazing Four know how to pull off a class act when they want to."

The Amazing Four? If things weren't already ridiculous enough, Maddox's group of friends had to have a nickname like that. And he had no idea about what Connor meant by a class act, as this party didn't look that different to him as opposed to others.

"I see that my joke was not well received, so I must suck at making them."

Connor offered him a pleasant smile, and only then Jonathan realized that the guy had actually put in the effort to brush his hair and no weird smell wafted away from his beard this time. Also, he wasn't accompanied by his usual posse and he wasn't talking about the important task resting on his shoulders alone, aka saving the planet.

"Oh, it was a joke? I'm afraid I'm the one who's slow on the uptake," he said courteously.

Connor stared into his cup for a few moments and sighed. "Jonathan, I cannot help but think that I gave you a wrong first impression. No, let me finish."

Jonathan had made no sign that he wanted to interrupt him but said nothing on the matter.

“I tend to be a little too overbearing with the things I’m passionate about, so I didn’t realize that I was making no effort to get to know you.”

“It’s admirable to have a passion and be so involved with it,” Jonathan offered politely.

“Yes, but that pushed you away.” Connor gave him a shrewd look.

“I wasn’t sure you were interested in me,” Jonathan said, aiming for a truth that wouldn’t inconvenience either of them.

“I am,” Connor said directly. “I think you’re a nice guy, the kind worth getting to know better. So, do you think we can start again? I promise I won’t try to kiss you out of the blue anymore and force you to leave the party early.”

Jonathan nodded. This was what he needed, someone uncomplicated who spoke his mind, right? And Connor wasn’t unattractive. On top of it all, he was openly gay, too, so there would be no sneaking about and looking over the shoulder.

“All right. Hi, I’m Jonathan Hamilton.”

“Connor Williams. Delighted.” Connor shook his hand and held it, brushing his thumb over Jonathan’s skin before letting go. “So, what brings you here?”

“To this party? My roommate, Ray.”

Connor laughed. “I like a man with a dry sense of humor.”

What do you know? Connor could be pleasant when he put his mind to it. Jonathan fell into a natural flow of conversation right away. It appeared that Connor was capable of talking about other things besides the impending and untimely death of Mother Earth.

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Maddox munched on a cracker with a vengeance, as he observed Connor all over Jonathan. They were chatting, but they looked like they were having fun, and that ground his gears. One of these days, he’d have a throw down with Connor, although he had never had one with anyone before, and that’s if he didn’t count how Jonathan had almost floored him with a single punch.

Nonetheless, Connor was trying to steal Jonathan, and he couldn’t let that happen without a fight of some sort. He didn’t know how that was supposed to go down, but he was pretty sure that if it were a kissing contest, he would win it, and then, Jonathan would have no choice but to kiss only him.

Rusty threw one arm over his shoulder. He pointed at Jonathan and Connor who were fortunately too far away to hear them. “What is Connor doing? Is he trying to steal your man?” Rusty gestured with a plastic cup that was still half full, making its contents slosh around dangerously. Great, now his buddy was half-drunk and cared only about pissing him off, Maddox thought.

“They’re just talking,” he said defensively. “And he’s not my man,” he added and pouted.

“For real? You had the guy in your room, and you didn’t score?”

“No, because you ruined it,” Maddox said pointedly.

“Me?” Rusty pointed at himself and seemed completely surprised at the accusation. “Nah, you must have said something stupid.”

“That’s it, I’m going to box your ears until you say that you’re a stupid sandwich,” Maddox threatened.

“So, when are you going to introduce him to us?” Rusty asked, completely deaf to the nasty fate being prepared for him.

“So that you can fill his head with stupidities about me? No way, first I need to secure the deal. Then, he’ll have to live with the fact that I have at least one moron as a best friend.”

“Who? Dex?”

Maddox had a feeling Rusty was much smarter than people thought he was. No, he was certain of it, but Rusty preferred, for his own reasons, to assume the role of a meathead, enjoying the popularity that came with it. He wouldn’t have been so kinky if he didn’t have a brain that worked on overdrive to satisfy his horniness. Not only Maddox, but Dex and Kane, too, secretly envied him for being so creative when it came to sex and everything related. However, Maddox couldn’t stop thinking that maybe, just maybe, Rusty was doing all that outrageous stuff to hide something. Was it a need to show off? Or was it boredom? One of these days, he would have to rope Kane in and have him work his magic on Rusty to discover what was really in his head. They had all been friends since high school, and Maddox liked to think he was Rusty’s best friend even within the limits of their tightknit group. Still, there was a part of Rusty that had always escaped him, and time and again, he had wanted to unravel it just to know his best friend for real.

It wasn’t the time to think of that, though. Instead of wondering what Rusty was up to, he needed to find a way to pull Jonathan away from Connor’s charms, and that without making the guy feel embarrassed.

“What am I supposed to do now?” He sighed and looked into his cup dejectedly.

“Do you mean, about Jonathan? Just leave it to me,” Rusty said, and before he could do or say anything, his friend took off.

Maddox wanted to stop him but, right then, Kane’s lacrosse buddies chose to grab him and push him toward the main room, under the pretext that they wanted him to meet someone. They were in various states of inebriation so dealing with them required a great deal of effort, and he was no match for their collective strength, either.

Just great. Now, he would have to do damage control after Rusty, too.

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“Hi, my dudes.”

Jonathan stopped mid-sentence as he sensed someone right behind him, leaning in dangerously close. As he turned his head, he found himself staring into a pair of mischievous green eyes. “Um, hello.” He knew who that was. Rusty Parker, one of the Amazing Four. As much as he wanted, there was no amount of irony he could add to that to make it sound as incredible as it did.

“Yo, Rusty,” Connor said and high-fived the guy over Jonathan’s shoulder. “Cool party.”

“Oh, yeah.”

Jonathan tried to move a bit away so that Rusty didn’t have to prop himself against him to have a conversation with Connor, but a heavy hand on his shoulder stopped him. Rightfully so, he felt slightly scandalized. Rusty didn’t appear to have any notion of what personal space meant. Jonathan could feel his warm body, hovering inches away from him from head to toes.

“Imma stealing Jonathan here for a moment. I want to ask him something in private.”

What on earth could Rusty want? Jonathan wondered. Could it be that he had caught a whiff of something going on with him and Maddox, and wanted to have a little laugh at his expense? Once again tonight, but for a different reason, Jonathan felt he was getting a bit too hot under the collar.

“Sure thing. Just don’t keep him for too long. I really like this guy,” Connor said. “And I’d like to get to know him better tonight.” The last words came along with a suggestive wink at Jonathan.

Whatever it was, he would set Rusty Parker as straight as they come and quickly. He flat out refused to become the mockery of the most popular group on campus. Therefore, he made no objections when Rusty pulled him away and then guided him outside through a back door. He wasn’t afraid of a little confrontation if that were what people thought about him.

The cool air was doing him good. Rusty just kept pushing him from behind until they were at a fair distance from the house, and the music was considerably fainter, along with the noise of the party.

“Well? What do you want?” Jonathan asked aggressively.

He didn’t have time to react when Rusty pushed his back against a tree, slamming him into it, and then quickly grabbing his arms and pulling them back.

“What on earth are you doing?” Jonathan raised his voice.

It was painfully clear that Rusty was using something to tie his wrists together, forcing him to wrap around the tree and have a spine-straightening experience he didn’t care for at the moment. On top of it all, the guy was humming a happy tune.

“Release me immediately! We’re not in fourth grade! What do you think you’re doing?”

Rusty stepped in front of him and swayed for a bit. Then, he raised one finger and wagged it at Jonathan. “You stay right here.”

“Really? Like I could leave as tied up as I am right now? Is this some sort of hazing? I’m not interested in pledging loyalty to your little group, just so you know.”

Rusty scoffed, hiccupped, and laughed, all at the same time. It was unnerving how quickly this guy had managed to overpower him while still being fairly drunk. “Well, you’ll have to. No way around it.”

“I object,” Jonathan said. “I have no interest in something like that, as I told you. You’re all a bunch of jokers.”

“Too bad you’re not interested,” Rusty declared. “Because we’re interested in you.”

We? What could he mean by that? “All right, all right, you want to have your fun, go ahead. What’s next? Will you throw water balloons at me?”

“Hmm, that sounds nice,” Rusty admitted. “I bet you’d fare well in a wet t-shirt contest.”

He wanted so damned much to stare this guy down, but it was too dark for that.

“I thought those were for girls only,” Jonathan shot back. He moved his wrists, but it looked like Rusty knew a bit too well what he was doing.

“You must have one hot bod under those grandpa clothes,” Rusty commented. “Right?”

“That’s none of your business,” Jonathan sputtered angrily. “Release me, or we’re going to have a problem.”

“Really? Wanna throw a punch?”

Jonathan didn't like where that was going. How much did Maddox share with his friends?

“Whatever,” Rusty said matter-of-factly since he chose to remain silent. “It's because you're so feisty, right? All piss and vinegar.”

“I have no idea what you mean.”

Rusty waved. “It doesn't matter. Just stay here.”

Jonathan shouted after him, but to no avail. Rusty just walked away, leaving him there.

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“All done.” Rusty pulled him away from some stupid drinking contest and then pushed him outside through the back door. “Walk straight for twenty feet, and to the right, you'll find your treasure, tied to a tree.”

“My treasure?”

“Just go. There's a chance he might chew his arm off to release himself.”

“Rusty, what the hell did you do?”

“Helping,” Rusty replied, and well, Maddox was sure the idiot was being honest when he said that.

He didn't waste any more time and hurried in the direction pointed to by Rusty, while his friend got back to the party. His steps slowed down only when he saw Jonathan.

Who, indeed, was tied up to a tree.

“Oh, fuck,” he said and sprinted toward him.

“Maddox?” Jonathan asked. “What the hell is this about?”

“Nothing, just my friend who is a complete and irremediable idiot. Let me untie you.” He moved around the tree and felt Jonathan's tied wrists. “Damn.” He touched the thin rope which who knew why Rusty had on him while at a party and tried to pull the knots apart.

“Well, what's taking you so long?” Jonathan asked impatiently.

“Well,” Maddox scratched his head and turned on the flashlight on his phone, “I'll need something to cut it because Rusty is too damned good at making knots.”

“Oh, that is just great,” Jonathan mumbled. “Is this some kind of joke to you guys, tying people to trees and all that? It’s not funny.”

“I assure you that Rusty acted completely on his own. I had nothing to do with it.”

“I have great trouble believing that. What does your friend know, anyway?”

“About what?”

“About us.”

“What ‘us’? You ran out the door like your pants were on fire, just like before, only then, you didn’t even have pants on.”

Maddox felt some of his irritation from before returning a little. Jonathan was good at slipping through his fingers, yet, right now, he had the guy all to himself, tied up –

He grinned. Rusty wasn’t quite the complete idiot he pretended to be, and what he had on his hands right now was proof of that.

He had an opportunity. Instead of struggling with the rope that appeared to be made from tough synthetic fibers, he straightened up and walked around to face Jonathan. The flashlight revealed a pretty nice sight. Jonathan was pouting, and he appeared mighty pissed. Somehow, the look worked great on him.

“Would you lower that? Or do you intend to interrogate me?” Jonathan hissed. “Please, just go and grab a pair of scissors. I’m not at all comfortable here.”

“Nah, I’ll just interrogate you first a little.”

“Ah, so it is some sort of hazing.”

Maddox snorted and turned off the flashlight. Then, he placed himself close enough to smell Jonathan’s pleasant scent and feel his hot breath on his face. “Why are you always running away from me?”

“I’m not running,” Jonathan said defensively.

“Oh, yes, you do. It sure looks like running to me. One minute you’re hot like a furnace, the next, you move to the North Pole.”

“What are you talking about?”

“This.” Maddox grabbed Jonathan by the back of the head and brought their lips together. Despite the surprise, or maybe because of it, the other opened his mouth and allowed the kiss.

This time, he didn't deepen it but pulled back. "You know, I think I'm starting to like you all tied up like this."

"Maddox," Jonathan let out a tense whisper, "anyone could come and see us."

"Is this what you worry about?"

"Yes, of course."

"Oh, snap. You don't want to be seen with me?"

"Is that a trick question?"

Maddox snorted. "I wish. You're one messed up dude. But I like kissing you like crazy."

"Don't even think about it," Jonathan warned.

"Oh, yeah?" Maddox brushed his lips over his, immediately earning a tiny desperate whimper from the other. "I can't because it's all I'm thinking of."

As much as Jonathan wanted to deny it, when he kissed back, it was a whole different story. And Maddox had to agree that while Jonathan's rejection was teasing him in all kinds of ways, having him pliant and unable to run had its charms.

But he wasn't the type to use tricks like that, as appealing as it was. So, with all the regret he could muster and cursing inwardly, he allowed himself just one last deep kiss for tonight. Boy, but Jonathan was a kisser, he thought, as their tongues did that now familiar dance. Funny how they didn't really know each other, but still, their bodies reacted so well to one another. As far as rules of attractions went, they were an incredibly good fit.

Now, the only thing left to do was to convince Jonathan of that undeniable truth. He moved his tongue around, enjoying the other's sweet mouth some more, choosing to caress and tease enough to leave him wanting, and then pulled back.

"Stay right here. I'll be back in a jiffy."

Jonathan mumbled something. "Why do you people keep thinking I could run away while being tied up to a tree?"

Maddox snickered. "Because you're an escape artist, that's why."

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Jonathan cursed under his breath as Maddox disappeared into the house. If they left him there for the entire night, he would have their heads, Amazing Four, or three, or two, it didn't matter. For a moment there, he had thought that Maddox would take advantage of the situation and start

doing things to him, and he half-regretted that there appeared to be no interest in that on the other's part.

Clearly enough, he was losing his mind. It was enough for Maddox to kiss him like that, and he was a goner. He would have allowed him to do whatever he wanted while being tied to a tree! And he didn't even know which one was worse, being the object of some strange ridicule, or a sex object for the most popular boy on campus.

He hadn't been able to come to any conclusion since Maddox had stepped away from him and left him there, just like Rusty before. Only that he didn't have time to meditate on his miserable fate for long because the back door opened again, and Maddox hurried toward him with something in his hand.

He chose silence as his hands were finally released from their ties. Now was as good a time as any to bolt. *Sorry, Ray, but your roomie just had enough excitement for tonight, and I hope you'll get home in one piece because I need to get out of here.*

Maddox stepped in front of him and took his wrists. Right away, he began to massage them gently, and Jonathan knew that he needed to pull his hands away or he might do something he'd come to regret.

"It's all right," he said in a ragged whisper, "it wasn't that tight."

"Yeah, Rusty is good at stuff like that," Maddox said.

Jonathan had a mind to ask what stuff, but that meant that he would just end up making conversation, and it appeared that they both weren't that good at it as it always led up to –

"Good night, Jonathan. I hope Rusty didn't ruin the party for you too badly."

Good night? Was Maddox sending him home now? Jonathan felt irritated and pulled his hands away from that gentle caress. "Good night," he said primly and pivoted on his heels.

"Do you want me to walk you to your dorm?" Maddox called from behind.

"No," he shouted back, but without turning. "It's not that far."

He needed to get out of there and fast. When he risked a look back, Maddox was still there, a dark silhouette, unmoving in the faint light.

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Well, the least he could do to protect the conquered territories was to push Jonathan to go home, as that was where no Connor was. Maddox observed with displeasure how Mother Nature's favorite son was looking everywhere for Jonathan, asking people if they had seen him.

“Hey, Maddox, did you happen to see Jonathan?”

He shook his head. “No. But he was saying something about not wanting to stay up too late.”

Connor groaned and ran his hands over his face. “This guy and his beauty sleep. Can you believe it? But I guess that’s how he keeps himself looking so great. Shoot, what am I telling you? As a straight dude, I don’t think you’d even notice things like that in another guy, right?”

Maddox offered a sheepish grin. “Yeah, totally.” What was this guy thinking? That he had a chance with Jonathan or something? No way, and not if he could help it. “So, how are things with you and him?” he asked, fishing for information.

Connor caressed his beard thoughtfully. “They’re good. We’re getting places.”

“Do you want him as your boyfriend or what?”

“That’s right,” Connor confirmed. “The name, the way he carries himself, how he dresses, and of course, that academic scholarship – did you hear about his perfect GPA?”

Maddox just nodded. “So you like how he dresses, is that it? And that he’s a straight A student?”

Connor patted him on the shoulder and winked. “Jonathan Hamilton is someone. I have yet to figure out who, but he is. And let’s say that I don’t mind getting myself an influential boyfriend.”

Maddox worked his jaw a little to mask the grimace threatening to twist his face. “Oh, yeah?” he asked.

Connor nodded with importance. “That, and I think that we’d make a power couple. Looking good and all that. Guy’s a total looker, right?”

He had never before saw himself as having violent tendencies, but right now, he could see himself wrapping his hands around Connor’s neck and making him breathe less of the precious planet’s air. Was that what Jonathan meant to this asshole? A way to get ahead in life or something?

“You know he’s working at the library to support himself.”

“He does?” Connor’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “I doubt that he does it to support himself, though. It must be only because he’s hardworking and wants to learn the value of a dollar. Come on, just look at how nice his clothes are, or the cologne he’s using. I doubt those are things someone who’s barely making ends meet would use.”

Connor knew shit about Jonathan. But then again, Maddox knew just as much. The difference was that he intended to remedy the situation, while Connor didn’t care at all, except for using that information to his advantage.

This tree hugger was no competition; he would make sure of that because there was no way he would allow some opportunist to mess with his Jonathan.

“Yeah, maybe,” he said. “Now sorry to leave you hanging, but my buddies need me.”

“That’s cool, man, no problem.” Connor patted him on the back again.

He plastered a smile on his face and fought hard not to brush away the dude’s touch. Saving the planet or not, Connor was kind of a douchebag.

Rusty caught up with him the moment he got rid of the guy. “So, how did you find your treasure?” he asked.

In the meantime, he appeared to have sobered up some, so Maddox thought it a good time to sit his friend down and talk a little about boundaries. “As you told me, by walking in a straight line for twenty feet. Seriously, Rusty, what were you thinking?” He took his friend by the shoulders and forced him down to his level. “Tying the guy up and stuff?”

“No stuff, I promise,” Rusty replied. “I only tied him up. I didn’t touch him or anything.”

Maddox rubbed his knuckles against Rusty’s head until the other let out a heartfelt ‘ouch’. “I didn’t even imply that. Wait, were you tempted to touch him?”

“No way,” Rusty protested. “You know I’m straight like a line with no curves.”

“Well, I thought I was, too, until he came along. Now I feel like I’m bending a little.”

“Bending? So you want to be the guy that takes it up --”

Maddox slapped his hand over Rusty’s mouth hard enough for the idiot to feel him. “Rusty, you’re my buddy, and I love you. But sometimes, you make me want to kick your ass so hard.”

Rusty just nodded and sat still until he was released. “All right, man. Don’t have my head over it. But I get the bending and all stuff. This Jonathan dude is really good looking.”

So, everyone was noticing it. Maddox began pondering over whether convincing Jonathan to start wearing a paper bag over his head whenever he walked out of the dorm was a good solution or not.

## *Chapter Ten - Making The Headlines*

“I’m afraid that’s what you get for drinking so much.” Jonathan wasn’t much into chastizing Ray, not after making so many mistakes of his own at that party, but his roommate’s constant whining about how his head was killing him was getting a little on his nerves. He had never been one to overdrink and had no idea how to deal with a hangover, not firsthand anyway, so he didn’t know how to make Ray feel any better.

They sat on the grass, chilling, while watching the other students pass by. In all honesty, Jonathan’s nervous state was more related to how he didn’t want to see Maddox, not Ray’s current predicament. Therefore, he had convinced his roomie to sit as far away from the more populated locales as possible, close to an old oak.

“Dex was so impressed with me,” Ray said proudly only to groan the next moment and press his fingers against his temples.

“Well, I don’t want to sound like your mom, Ray, but you shouldn’t let yourself become a victim to peer pressure and do stupid things. Dex is like thrice your size. Of course, he can drink anyone under the table. It’s all a matter of who has the biggest liver. And how come you’re still hungover on Monday?” He pushed Ray’s hands away and began to apply his own brand of massage. His roommate groaned, but more in pained pleasure this time.

“Okay, mom, but where were you and what did you do at the party? You practically disappeared.”

“I was around,” Jonathan said brusquely.

“Were you around with Connor? The guy kept asking about you.”

Jonathan did feel guilty about Connor, leaving him like that, but Maddox had the uncanny ability of making him forget anyone else existed on the face of the planet.

“No, not with Connor,” he blurted out without thinking.

“Really?” Ray’s eyes lit up like a Christmas tree. “Who with?” he asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” Jonathan said quickly.

“Seriously? Where is the roommate code so that I can rub your nose in it? You need to tell me everything.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Hmm, that means that I’ll have to figure it out. Was it one of the guys on the lacrosse team?”

“Ray, I doubt any of those guys is gay.”

“Right, right, hmm, hmm. Who else disappeared at the same time as you?”

Jonathan needed to stop Ray before he figured out the truth. “Look, Ray, it’s not important because nothing will ever come of it.”

“Really, why?”

“Because,” Jonathan struggled to find the right words, “he’s a bad boy, and, well, it wouldn’t work out. I wouldn’t be able to date him, have a relationship out in the open, and all that. You know, the things any good guy would want.”

“Ugh, keep it up like this and people will start thinking that you’re actually dating me,” Ray said with a roll of the eyes.

Jonathan ruffled his hair. “And how would that be bad, huh? Didn’t you want to play the ‘who’s gay’ game with the girls on campus?”

Ray pouted. “With all due respect, JJ, I think I could do better if I were gay.”

They both burst into laughter at the same time. Jonathan grabbed Ray and began to wrestle him. “Take that back or it’s only ramen for you all week.”

“I’m not negotiating with terrorists,” Ray declared while pretending to fight back. “I’m just giving up.”

Jonathan finally let go of his roomie and straightened up. They both turned as they heard a short swish coming from behind the tree.

“What was that?” Ray asked.

Jonathan shrugged and got to his feet. He walked around the tree but saw nothing. “The wind, probably.”

Ray leaned toward him and threw him a conspiratorial look. “Sometimes, I have the weirdest sensation that someone is watching us.”

“Come on, Ray. Everyone’s watching us since we’re playing the fools.” Jonathan gestured at the students walking by who sometimes cast a glance in their direction. Nothing that appeared to be out of the ordinary, as far as he could tell. “Don’t tell me drinking too much made you paranoid, too.”

Ray shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve never had a proper hangover before.”

“I doubt proper hangovers exist. Aren’t you a little too proud of getting drunk with Dex Solomon? If he gets all the fun and I get to treat your hangovers, I’m going to have a word with that guy.”

“Ha! Feel free to try. I bet you’re no match for him.”

“What are you even thinking, Ray? That I’ll challenge him to a fight? I’m just going to tell him politely to stop plying you with alcohol at any given chance, not go against him.”

“And he’ll hug you so snugly that you won’t be able to breathe anymore.”

Jonathan shook his head. “All right, I won’t then since he sounds so scary. Now how about heading over to class?” he said hurriedly.

When it came to Maddox Kingsley, he had a special sense developed, he had noticed. The guy was just walking through the quad with his friends, and by his body language, he had already seen him. That meant that he needed to make a run for it, and fast.

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“Is that your boyfriend over there?” Kane asked and pointed shamelessly at Jonathan who was just standing and offering his roommate a hand to help him up.

“Shut up, dumbass, he’s not my boyfriend,” Maddox mumbled. Since the party, he had expected at least a text or something, but his phone had been annoyingly silent. And he had behaved like a perfect gentleman, allowing Jonathan to get away when he’d been practically at his mercy.

“So make him your boyfriend if that’s what you want,” Kane insisted.

“Who said that?” Maddox snapped.

“Do you want just to hook up?” Rusty butted in.

“I thought it was more serious than that,” Dex intervened.

“Ugh, guys, just stop bugging me,” Maddox groaned. “I don’t know what I want, ‘cause this guy just slips through my fingers every time, and I don’t have time to figure it out.”

“Did he manage to get out of my famous hitch?” Rusty asked. “How?”

“What is the lunatic talking about?” Kane asked in turn.

“He tied Jonathan to a tree for me.”

“I had no idea this evolved into a threesome,” Dex said.

“Guys, guys, just shut the hell up. For some reason, Jonathan doesn’t want to be seen with me. Is my reputation that bad?”

“Yes,” Dex said promptly.

Maddox punched him in the arm. “Thanks for nothing, bud.”

Rusty was busy on his phone. “Ha,” he said triumphantly, “you gotta see this, Maddox.”

“What?”

“Sunny Hill Xpress just published something on him.”

“What?” Dex and Kane asked at the same time. “Just read it already.”

Rusty cleared his throat with self-importance. *“Resident gay heartthrob Jonathan Hamilton has high standards when it comes to pairing up. And who could blame him? He’s got the looks, excellent preppy fashion sense, presumably an impeccable pedigree, and did you hear about his perfect GPA? Our reporters just got a glimpse of a conversation with his roommate that shed more light on why our most recent and hottest transfer of the year is still single. A word to the wise, gay boys of Sunny Hill. Good guys don’t date bad boys.”*

“O.M.G.,” Kane said slowly, emphasizing each capital letter of the acronym.

Dex laughed, and Rusty scratched his head. “Who’s a bad boy? Maddox?”

Kane was laughing his ass off. “You must have made quite an impression on the guy. What did you do to him? Now I’m seriously curious.”

Maddox pouted. “No way I’m telling you guys anything else from now on. And I didn’t do anything to him. He’s actually the guy who threw a punch at me. Why don’t they write about that?”

“Maybe because that stuff is private,” Dex warned him. “And don’t bother with the stupid shit in Xpress. If you really want the guy, just go for him. If he has the wrong impression of you, just make sure to set him straight.”

“Huh, Maddox doesn’t want to set Jonathan straight,” Rusty intervened. “He likes him because he’s gay.”

“Rusty,” Dex exhaled and pinched the bridge of his nose hard, “remind me why I love you.”

“Because I’m fun and have a sunny disposition,” Rusty replied promptly.

Kane laughed. “Aren’t you way too fond of that description Sunny Hill Xpress gave you freshman year?”

“He is,” Maddox and Dex said at the same time.

Maybe setting Jonathan straight wasn't high on his list, but he truly needed to make the guy see that he meant business and that he wasn't going to fold and admit defeat. Not when they kissed each other like that and it was enough being in the same room alone and sparks flew everywhere.

Jonathan had no idea who he was messing with.

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"Another party? Really?" Jonathan wasn't sure that he was up for being forced to meet Maddox again in close quarters, especially after doing an awesome job of keeping away from him all week. To his relief and disappointment, Maddox had been suspiciously unaware of his presence, or so he let him think. When it came to this guy, Jonathan wasn't sure anymore of anything. It was enough that his feelings and thoughts were all jumbled up, and it should have been impossible to be disappointed by not having Maddox throw him pointed glances when they were anywhere close to each other.

"Yes. We don't go out enough," Ray argued.

"What are you even saying? We're getting out every day to go to class."

"Don't argue with me," Ray warned him. "And I'm tired of hearing you sigh all the time, thinking of your bad boy who isn't Connor. Are you sure he's that bad?"

"Bad for me, at least," Jonathan replied.

"Tell me," Ray got in his face and watched him intently, "did you kiss?"

Jonathan blushed and looked away.

"Ah, ah, ah," Ray expressed his excitement through non-words. "And how was it? You're blushing. It must have been ah-mazing. Gosh, this is like a fairytale."

"It's no fairytale, as I assure you there are no fairies or monsters involved."

Ray snickered. "Don't tell me it's like Red Riding Hood and the big bad wolf. Get it? Bad wolf, bad boy."

"Can I rip that roommate code apart? I need to have the legal framework to strangle you," Jonathan warned, too aware of the warmth in his cheeks. "You'll find me in a red hoodie when I'm dead."

"Then just come to the party with me. Forget about your bad boy by meeting others."

"One is enough, I assure you."

"You know what I mean. Let's just have fun," Ray insisted.

“Well, if you insist. But you’re going to be saddled with me all night. No going drinking with Dex and his gang, or other things. You deserve to be in my boring company throughout the party, and then I bet you won’t insist on us going together the next time.”

“Like I’d be scared,” Ray countered. “I’m sure I can help you loosen up. By the end of the night, you’ll be the soul of the party.”

That was a bit hard to imagine, Jonathan thought. But he wasn’t one to rain on Ray’s parade. Plus, maybe, just maybe, he wanted to see Maddox again. That was the part of him that was always a glutton for punishment, but he couldn’t resist it.

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Maddox couldn’t recall the last time he had needed a strategy to have someone fall for his charms. Going against Jonathan Hamilton felt a bit like a game of chess and, as of right now, his opponent had made his move.

And by that, he meant that Jonathan had found it funny to use his roommate as a buffer between them. Although the party had been raging on for hours, he hadn’t managed to catch Jonathan alone, and his attempts had been countered in various sly ways. And always, always, Ray the roommate was there, and Maddox couldn’t just walk over and drag Jonathan away, as much as he desired to do exactly that. Dex had proven equally unsuccessful in getting Ray to join him in a drinking game.

Why on earth were those two joined at the hip? Ray was, all of a sudden, very unlikeable to Maddox. He had no right to monopolize Jonathan’s attention like that. Just who did he think he was? His boyfriend or something?

Maddox froze as the thought hit him. He hadn’t heard any rumors or anything, but now that he thought about it, Ray was always there, and what if Jonathan was into the nerdy type? Fuck. Now he needed to get glasses and striped polo shirts. No, no, no, his clothes weren’t the issue.

Ray, inconspicuous Ray, with his awkward lanky body and sheepish smile, must have gotten under Jonathan’s skin somehow. According to Dex, the guy was straight, but Maddox was the living proof that Jonathan could turn straight guys on their heads if he wished with just a flutter of those pretty eyelashes of his. And Ray, well, the guy lived with Jonathan. Probably, more than once, he must have bumped into Jonathan stepping out of the shower, in nothing but his birthday suit. A single look, a meaningful one, would have been enough—

Maddox groaned and leaned against the wall while he examined the object of his unrestrained affection laughing and talking to his roommate like there was no else in the universe. He needed to stop thinking of Jonathan seducing Ray by accident if he were to keep his head clear and in the game.

“So, he’s there,” Rusty pointed out and joined him in hugging the wall. “And you’re here. How is this supposed to work? Do you have sex from a distance, like tantric and shit?”

Maddox turned his head lazily to give Rusty a death glare, but he was met by an all-knowing grin. “You’re having fun, aren’t you?”

Rusty shrugged. “It’s funny to see you like this. But it’s not the same ever since I have no competition on calling dibs on all the pretty girls on campus.”

“I thought you’d be happy,” Maddox said.

“Yeah. Nothing’s the same without my bro, though. Hey, do you think you’ll get over this dude soon?”

Rusty’s question caught him off guard. “Dunno. Don’t think so. I mean, look at him. He’s almost not real.”

His buddy followed his example and stared at Jonathan for a while. “Yeah,” he said softly.

What the hell was getting into Rusty these days? He partied the hardest ever since Maddox had known him, hooking up like crazy, and making a lot of girls happy in the process. Rusty had real skill in finding chicks who loved to have fun just as much as him, so there were no severe cases of broken hearts there. But, if he thought about it, which he hadn’t done lately because he’d been too absorbed with his crush on Jonathan, something was a bit off about Rusty’s shenanigans.

“Hey, what’s with you?” he asked.

Rusty puffed his cheeks and exhaled. “With me? My buddy is crushing on a dude, and he’s letting him slip through his fingers like he’s some kind of noob.”

Somehow, Maddox doubted that was the real reason, but not even Kane could brag about being able to tell all the time what was going through Rusty’s head, especially since said head was usually filled to the brim with the kinkiest stuff a human being could think of.

“Well, bud, the truth is I’m a noob when it comes to getting boys,” he explained.

Rusty snorted. “Bullshit. You’re just treating him like he’s made of glass. He’s not. He’s a 180-pound hunk who can take it like a champ.”

Maddox didn’t stop to think about how Rusty could tell Jonathan’s weight just by looking at him. He was more intrigued about the rest of his friend’s statement. “Take what like a champ?”

Rusty glared like Maddox was hard-headed and couldn’t understand basic things about life in general. Then he raised his hands and was just about to simulate an act that needed no extra explanations. Maddox caught him just in time. “So,” he started to distract Rusty from his usual craziness, “what am I supposed to do, oh, wise one?”

“Grab him and kiss him right there.” Rusty pointed at where Jonathan was standing. “He’ll get the point, guaranteed.”

“And I’ll get a punch in the face and at least some minor surgery,” Maddox replied.

Rusty patted him on the shoulder. “Grow some balls, my dude. Or just remember where you put them ‘cause they surely ain’t between your legs right now.”

Maddox shook his head. Well, he needed to talk to Jonathan, but to avoid embarrassing him in front of his roommate who probably had no idea about his friend’s illicit adventures with Maddox, first, the obstacle had to be removed.

*Le wild* light bulb popped right away. He needed to check something anyway. But first, he had to find the right person for the job.

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If he did as little as turn his head a fraction of an inch, he would meet Maddox’s famous glare. Not that he knew that glare to be famous, but he knew it well, and it meant that something was happening right under the surface. Maddox was pissed at him, and the thought was making him uncomfortable. Not enough to make him give up on his cowardice and allow Ray to leave his side and have fun, but still.

It was a battle he couldn’t win. There was nothing simpler than that truth. If Maddox came to him and kissed him right there, in front of everyone, his knees would buckle under him, and he would become the first emergency case in history of literally falling victim to a helpless crush.

“I need the bathroom,” Ray said. “Do you want to come...”

“No,” Jonathan said shortly. He wasn’t that bad a case as to follow his roommate everywhere.

“Stay here, okay? And if any bad boys bother you, just let them know that I have a mean right hook.”

Jonathan chuckled and then met Ray’s knowing look. So, his roommate had guessed the truth anyway. Of course, he was a smart guy, and Jonathan could lie to himself all he wanted, but lying to Ray was a different thing altogether.

“Just go. I’ll be fine,” he said and pushed Ray playfully away.

He stared into his cup for lack of anything better to do while waiting for his roommate’s return. The last thing he needed to do was to raise his eyes and meet Maddox’s glare.

Well, it appeared that his strategy of avoidance meant nothing. He closed his eyes as he sensed someone stopping by his side.

“You know, I had no idea,” Maddox started.

There was no follow up, so Jonathan was forced to look at him, as that was the polite thing to do. “Of what, exactly? And hello to you, too.”

Maddox scoffed. Oh, he was definitely pissed. “Hello? You’ve done a great job of avoiding me all night.”

“Avoiding you? I just stood here all night,” Jonathan said defensively. “And we’re not close or anything, right?”

He regretted every single word as it left his mouth, but it was what he had to do. No fooling around with Maddox Kingsley. He had promised himself, dammit.

“No, I suppose we’re not,” Maddox agreed.

Jonathan couldn’t look at him. He rested his gaze somewhere else and shifted nervously. “Do we have a problem?”

Maddox leaned dangerously close. Jonathan could feel his hot breath on his lips, that close they were. “Yeah, we do. If I had a fucking magic wand that could make all the people around us disappear this second, the next we’d be kissing like crazy, and I’d make you swallow your words about not being close or anything.”

It wasn’t fair. The problem was him. He was the one who kept falling for the wrong guys. What was he even thinking?

“So, yeah, I had no idea that you were such a huge coward,” Maddox added.

All right, so that hit so close to home that Jonathan recoiled slightly and stared into Maddox’s eyes that were filled with a mix of longing, hurt, and something else that wasn’t easy to describe or define. “I don’t know what you mean,” he said softly.

“You do,” Maddox contradicted him. “Heed my words, Hamilton. One of these days, you’re going to come knocking on my door.”

“What for? Some sugar?” Jonathan made a lame attempt at a joke. His throat was dry, and the way he talked was unnatural and forced.

Maddox smirked. He pushed away the rebellious strands of hair falling in his eyes. “Yeah, that. Just so you know, when that happens, I’m going to give you all the sugar you need and then some.” His eyes dropped to Jonathan’s lips as he talked.

“Maddox,” Jonathan breathed out, “wouldn’t it better if you saved all that for someone who’s more deserving?”

“Deserving? It’s like you’re talking about charity. I don’t do charity. When it comes to what I want to give you, trust me, there’s no one more deserving. Yeah, you deserve to be tied to a bed and force fed it until you stop denying wanting it.”

Jonathan could feel his skin getting hot. He was used to a carefree Maddox who seemed to be all about fooling around and joking, not this intense person whose words were dipped in dark honey and then allowed to drip over his already frayed nerves.

He gulped. The sound of his throat doing that was loud in his ears, but he was only imagining things.

Maddox pushed himself away from the wall. “I’ll leave you with this. I sincerely hope this gives you as many sleepless nights as you’ve given me since you came to Sunny Hill.”

Sleepless nights? If Maddox meant it as a curse thrown over his shoulder, he couldn’t be more far off. Jonathan was losing just as much sleep over him, if not more. Before he had a chance to sneak another word in, however, Maddox was already gone.

And Ray was rushing toward him with his eyes gleaming and his face flushed. “JJ, hate me, but you need to release me from my oath. A girl, a real girl, alive, with two arms, two legs, and…”

“I understand what a real girl is,” Jonathan stopped his friend’s tirade. “What about her?”

“She talked to me,” Ray blurted out. “And,” he leaned in and whispered, “she kissed me.”

Jonathan’s eyes grew wide. Just like that? He could start giving Ray the speech, but maybe this girl just wanted to have fun, and his roommate would surely argue that such occasions didn’t appear too often, so he kept his mouth shut. He grabbed Ray by the shoulders and pulled him into a hug. “Don’t worry about me, Ray. Go have fun.”

“You sure? I feel a little guilty…”

“Completely sure. Just go. We’ll talk later. Just so you know, I don’t need all the details, okay?”

Ray kissed him on the cheek. “You’re the best roommate ever, JJ. I’ll cook next week for this.”

“No, don’t you dare,” Jonathan warned playfully. “Just hurry up and don’t let her find another boy to kiss, okay?”

“Right. Off I go,” Ray said and squeezed Jonathan again in his arms before letting go.

Jonathan watched him go with a small smile which faded fast when he saw a girl who looked nothing short of a Playboy bunny wrapping her arm around Ray’s and giving him a loving look. Something was wrong with that picture.

He couldn't go after Ray and stop him from doing something that he would regret later. There were things that people had to be allowed to do, even if they were mistakes. And, just as with Ray's hangovers, he would do his best to offer his support.

On the other order of business, he needed to get out of there before Maddox found him again. He had his own sleepless nights to worry about.

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"And you cannot believe it, JJ, but she likes reading the same books as me," Ray continued his recount of the many qualities Hanna, the girl from the previous night, had under her belt.

Jonathan couldn't quite put the picture of this Hanna Ray was talking about together with the Playboy bunny he had noticed at the party getting all over his roommate. It was like they were two different people. "Hanna is the girl in that tiny pink dress, right?"

Ray rolled his eyes. "Yes, how many times do I have to tell you? It's like you don't believe me." With that, he added a suspicious glare.

"I do, it's just, um, never mind."

"No, say it," Ray challenged him.

"All right." Jonathan breathed deeply. "It's just that girls like her don't usually... Just forget it."

To his surprise, Ray jumped to his feet. "You can say it, JJ. Girls like her don't hang out with guys like me, right? They deserve better, right?" He stormed out of the room.

Jonathan hurried after him and was met by a door slammed in his face. "Ray, come on, you know that's not what I mean." He leaned against the doorjamb. "It's just that such girls are usually vapid and search only for guys who are as superficial as them."

"Easy for you to say. You make all the sexy bad boys on campus fall in love with you," Ray protested from behind the closed door.

"Wow, really, Ray? You know that's not true. Come on, I love you. And it's you who deserve better, not her."

"You don't know her. I'm mad at you. You rained on my parade," came the miffed words.

"You know what? You're right. I don't know her. Did you get her number? Are you going to see her again?"

Silence followed, and the door finally opened. Ray sniffled. "No."

Jonathan stood there, nonplussed. "What do you mean, no? Didn't you two have fun last night?"

Ray looked down. "I did. I don't know about her. Maybe she got bored."

Jonathan sighed. "Did you forget to ask for her number or did she refuse to give it to you?"

Ray shifted from one foot to another. "She said that it was fun and liberating to talk to someone without being judged. And I forgot to ask for her number."

"She must be a student here. You'll meet her again. Now, how about I make your favorite and you remember everything you can that could help you find her again?"

"Mac and cheese?" Ray's face lit up.

"That's what I meant, obviously." Jonathan smiled.

A loud knock took them both by surprise. Jonathan went to get the door, and found himself face to face with a girl dressed in a sailor cut shirt and tight jeans. She was pretty and wore no makeup, and Jonathan thought she was vaguely familiar. Her nose was a bit red and she looked like she'd been crying.

"I'm Hanna," she said in a throaty pleasant voice. "Is Ray in?"

Jonathan stepped aside. "Hello, Hanna. Please, come in. Ray, Hanna is here," he called for his roommate.

Ray materialized by his side in an instant. Hanna threw his arms around him and began crying. "I'm sorry, I really like you, but I need to tell you the truth, Ray."

Jonathan felt like a notorious third wheel. "I think you two need some privacy. I'll be in my room if you need me." He began walking away when Hanna started talking again. She seemed to be as extra as Ray, so surely they had something in common.

"Maddox told me I should talk to you and see if you were interested in girls, and I--"

Jonathan turned on his heel at the speed of light. "Maddox did what?"

Hanna stared at him, confused. She pressed a tissue against her nose. "Maddox told me to talk to Ray to see if he were gay, but I like Ray for real," she said simply.

Now he knew what he had thought was wrong with that picture when he had seen Hanna all over Ray. He ground his teeth and jumped into his shoes.

"Where are you going?" Ray asked.

Jonathan cracked his knuckles. "I'm going to teach a bad boy some bloody manners."

## *Chapter Eleven - Cock Fight*

Jonathan felt like he was being suffocated by how angry he felt. The only explanation was that Maddox had somehow thought of Ray being the competition or something along those lines. That, however, gave him no right to put some girl up to seduce Ray and who knew what else. Hanna appeared to be an honest albeit aloof girl, and according to her declarations, she liked Ray for real, but that still didn't make things right.

Maddox Kingsley, Mad Dawg or not, would have to be held accountable for his actions. And if there were anything good enough to cure Jonathan of his obsession with the guy, proving the guy was an absolute asshole after all could do the trick.

He knocked on the door to the house Maddox was sharing with his friends with increased urgency. Dex opened it and stared at him for a moment.

"Is Maddox in?" It would be so stupid if he had hurried there without even knowing if Maddox were home.

Dex grinned and opened the door wider. "Sure. Upstairs--"

"I know where it is. And please, wipe that grin off your face. You better keep 911 on speed dial."

Sure enough, Dex's smile faded rapidly. Jonathan moved quickly past him and rushed up the stairs, but not fast enough to not hear Rusty commenting, "911? Just how kinky are you two going to get?"

He ground his teeth hard. This had nothing to do with being kinky, and damn if Maddox couldn't make him hot under the collar in all possible ways, and not all good. What was he thinking? No way was good with the most popular slash bad boy on campus, and he needed to get him out of his system for good, while trying to get himself out of the other's at the same time.

The first thing he did when he stopped in front of the door wasn't to take a deep breath, but to knock angrily and then let himself in. Too bad for Maddox if he were naked with some girl in his bed. He surely deserved the embarrassment.

"What the absolute hell, Kingsley?" he started as soon as he let himself in and slammed the door behind him.

Instant regret over not taking that deep breath almost knocked him off his feet the moment his eyes landed on Maddox. Who was indeed naked, save for a pair of shorts, and was doing reps with dumbbells in both hands while listening to music on his headphones. His muscles were glistening and, for a moment, Jonathan did nothing but stare at those gorgeous arms and perfect washboard abs. He temporarily forgot why he was there and wondered why he couldn't just walk over and run his hands over those amazing pectorals while deciding if they were truly real.

His unwitting host grinned at him, dropped the dumbbells, and took out his airpods, throwing them quickly on the desk. The pretty gray eyes gave him a suggestive once over, then Maddox picked up a towel and wiped the sweat off his forehead. Jonathan had the weirdest desire that he would just stop there and leave the rest alone.

“What’s up, Hamilton? Knocking on my door already? Want some sugar?” Maddox drawled the words.

That had the effect of a cold shower, and Jonathan remembered right away why he was there, filled with wishes for righteous retribution. “Don’t you dare joke around,” he hissed. He walked over to Maddox and pushed against his shoulder, his perfect, sweaty shoulder, with two fingers. “Why on earth would you send that bunny to attack Ray?”

“Attack? Bunny?” Maddox asked, looking adorably confused.

Ha! Like he would fall prey for the same act again. “Hanna,” Jonathan said through his teeth. “Does the name Hanna ring a bell or do I need to box your ears until you remember?”

“Ah, Hanna. Why are you calling her a bunny? It’s not very nice and her front teeth are not that big.”

Jonathan groaned. “You put her up to seducing Ray. Why? Was it some weird way of getting back at me? What for?” Somehow, Maddox’s naked chest was too distracting and his eyes just kept wandering downward. His fingers itched to drag themselves through the dark hair covering them. In the process, his righteous anger was finding it hard to stay hot.

“I had to know if you turned Ray, too,” Maddox said promptly.

“Turned Ray?” Jonathan’s voice rose another notch.

“Yeah. If you made him gay,” Maddox explained, like there was any need for that.

Jonathan sputtered, annoyed. “That’s certainly not the case. And Ray could be bisexual, not that he is, and it wouldn’t be your business anyway. That’s it,” he added quickly. “If you have a problem with me, come to me with it. Leave Ray alone.”

“Why? Is he your boyfriend?” Maddox threw at him tersely. “Because he sure was quick to forget about you--”

Jonathan took two steps back and put his fists up. “Let’s settle this with some old-fashioned throw down. As you can see, I’m a gentleman and I’ll give you a chance to prepare this time.”

Maddox gave him a stricken look. “You came here so that we could throw punches at each other? Are you insane?”

“Indeed I am. Before, landing that punch was clearly beginner’s luck, and I’m starting not to regret it. Given how much experience you have with fights, I’ll probably be in a world of pain within the next minute, but I’m here to settle things once and for all.”

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What the hell was Jonathan spewing now? And he wanted to fight? Not that he didn’t look kind of cute, all worked up like that, Maddox thought and grinned. Well, seeing how much of a prick he was being, he didn’t deserve to learn the truth about Hanna, at least not right away. It appeared that Jonathan thought him to be a bad boy, and now Maddox was more than willing to prove him right just to give him a taste of all the suffering he had endured over the last weeks because of him.

Jonathan still wanted him like crazy, and Maddox was no longer willing to overlook that. Even now, seething with rage and trying to act tough, he was letting his eyes wander down, and his eyelashes flutter, while his lower lip trembled just a smidge.

Maybe he had no experience whatsoever with guys, but boy, Jonathan would not leave this room the way he’d done before. Maddox moved fast and caught Jonathan’s wrists with ease. He smirked as he sensed not that much resistance from the other, and a surprised gasp told him what he needed to know. Forcefully, he began to push Jonathan backward, manipulating him so he landed on the bed. With ease, he straddled his waist and held him between his thighs, making sure to apply enough pressure to ensure that there was no escape for his prey.

Showtime.

“You’re talking about being a gentleman? I’ve been nothing but that ever since we met, and you’ve been nothing but a prick about it.”

Jonathan was staring at him with wide eyes. His breath was coming in short puffs, and he smelled of nothing more than arousal. Yeah, Maddox thought, the dude was just as horny for him as he was.

“A gentleman? When were you that?” Jonathan protested, but made no move to free his hands, as if his entire strength had drained out of him.

“I had you here,” Maddox growled menacingly while trying hard not to break into laughter. Since Jonathan had it so bad for bad boys, he had to oblige. “You were in this room, and I had my hands almost in your pants, and I let you run away. Then I had you tied to a tree, and I let you escape again.”

“I thought you said I was the escape artist,” Jonathan said defensively. “Not that you let me go.”

Maddox smirked. “I was just being careful of your feelings, darling. But seeing what a huge jerk you can be about other people’s feelings, you deserve to be treated as you should.” With that, he

let go of Jonathan's wrists and pushed him onto his back. He loomed above him, enjoying every moment of watching Jonathan lick his lips and let out small huffs while doing nothing to release himself. "Tell you what. I'm going to give you a chance to get away this time, too." He pressed his crotch against Jonathan's and grinned when his body met the unmistakable hardness there. "I'm going to kiss you and count to ten. Then I'm going to see if you got hard. If you're limp and still hate me, I'm going to let you go. See? I'm actually a good guy."

Jonathan snorted. Ah, so there still was some fight left in him. "I'm not playing your --"

Maddox pressed their lips together fast, enjoying how Jonathan opened his mouth right away to get tongue. Just as fast, he pulled back, leaving the other wanting more. He grabbed Jonathan's crotch and let a grin split his face. "Ten, jackpot."

"Ten? You didn't even count," Jonathan protested.

"I can count really fast, and Hamilton," Maddox said while pushing himself off the bed, "that's a perfect ten erection right there. Come on, out with it, so that we can finally do what we should have been doing since the first day we met."

Jonathan pressed his hands over his crotch in a defensive manner. "What do you want?"

Maddox knew he was pushing his luck, basically, but all this playing around with Jonathan was driving him nuts. "You wanted a fight. So let's have it. Only it's going to be on my terms."

"What do you mean?" Jonathan mumbled.

Oh, but he was so pretty, horny and confused like that. He could be out and proud all he wanted, his lack of experience just made him all the more desirable. Maddox decided on the spot that he would be Jonathan's first in all ways possible.

He pointed a finger at him in warning. "We're going to have a cock fight. Get rid of your clothes. I want you naked by the time I count to ten."

"But you count really fast," Jonathan complained.

"I'll make an exception and count like an average person. One. Off with the sweater."

To his surprise, Jonathan followed his command obediently and pulled the sweater over his head.

"All right. Two, the shirt."

Hopefully, Jonathan didn't have on more than ten articles of clothing. By eight, he was just as Maddox had wanted him for so long, naked in his bed, wearing nothing but the most delicious blush. With a smirk, he pushed down his shorts, letting his erection bounce around happily. Then he climbed on the bed and straddled Jonathan again. "Sorry about not taking a shower," he whispered, only then realizing that he was kind of stinking. "Should I--"

“It’s all right,” Jonathan whispered and wrapped one hand around the back of Maddox’s neck and pulled him in for a kiss.

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A fight was a fight, Jonathan thought as he let his lips crush against Maddox’s plump ones with reckless abandon. Despite his horrible manners, Maddox had a point, and that was the surest way to work it out of their system, the both of them. Any belligerent intent was gone from his mind now, and while he was acutely aware that he was basically succumbing to the one thing he had promised himself not to succumb to, it was impossible to stop.

One way or another, he would set things straight with Maddox, and then everyone’s universe would get back to normal. “How is this cock fight supposed to work?” he murmured against the other’s lips.

“Like this,” Maddox said and pressed their hard cocks together.

The friction was too little and still killing him at the same time. Jonathan couldn’t suppress a moan. “What are the victory conditions?”

Maddox moved his lips along his jawline, making him mad with desire. He was shaking with it by now, and he probably should have thought twice before barging in and stumbling over a naked sweaty Maddox. The scent of the other’s skin was enough to drive him crazy, but he needed to go all in and plow through until there was nothing left of this ridiculous crush.

“Victory conditions, hmm,” Maddox hummed against his skin. “Whoever comes first will have to be the other’s slave for a month.”

“A month? Seriously?” Jonathan breathed out. Naughty fingers were pulling gently at his left nipple, sending ripples of new arousal straight to his cock. At the same time, Maddox was getting busy devouring the side of his neck, by sucking in the skin and letting it free with loud lewd noises. “And what would this slavery entail?”

“Everything,” Maddox said enigmatically.

“I can’t sign up for that, it’s just too vague,” Jonathan protested meekly.

Maddox was grinding against him slowly. “Then let me phrase it like this. I’ll win--”

“You’re so full of it,” Jonathan shot back.

“Don’t interrupt. I’ll win, and then, for one month, we’ll hook up like crazy.”

“Do you expect me to have sex with you?” Jonathan asked, trying so hard to muster outrage where there was none. “I don’t intend to let you fuck me in the ass.” Hell if he didn’t intend to do just that, but only because he was completely out of his mind.

“Then don’t lose,” Maddox said with an all-knowing smirk. “Just so you know, I wasn’t thinking of full-blown penetration, but since you brought it up, I’m seriously warming up to the idea.”

“What? But what could hooking up mean?” Jonathan tried to backpedal, with no success. Now, Maddox’s tongue was in his ear forcing all rational thoughts to leave his head.

“Lots of things, virgin boy. I’m not the one obsessed with anal fucking, though. It must be that you’ve thought of it already.” Maddox’s voice was sweet as honey in his ear. “Have you, Jonathan? Ever thought of me fucking you? Popping that delicious cherry of yours?”

He squirmed and trembled. With one impossible last effort, he stared into those naughty pretty eyes, and froze. Maddox freaking Kingsley was making fun of him! “No, never,” he replied stubbornly, unwilling to lose so easily.

Maddox moved again, pressing hard against him. “Liar,” he teased. “Don’t worry. I’ll make you want it. I’ll drive you as nuts as you’re driving me right now.”

“I’m doing nothing,” Jonathan replied. Everything Maddox did to him made him dizzy with more want.

“Then maybe you should start if you don’t want to lose this cock fight.”

That was, actually, good advice. Jonathan had never thought of himself as some seducer, but one thing he could do. He brought his mouth over Maddox’s lovely lips and pushed his tongue inside. Tasting that bad boy was like tasting everything that was sweet and forbidden in the world. He should have known better, but there they were, and maybe it was better to just have this burn and fizzle. Maddox was sure to get over it once he satisfied his curiosity regarding sex with a guy.

But letting him fuck him? That was a stretch, so yes, maybe he needed to put his all into not losing. Maddox, after all, knew as little about sex with a guy as him, and that gave them the middle ground needed for a fair fight. Jonathan allowed his hands to wander down Maddox’s muscular back until they reached the enticing curve of his ass. This straight boy needed to be taught a lesson, after all. He grabbed the round mounds with his hands and began to tease them together, parting them and pushing them together while his fingers inched closer and closer to the crack.

That appeared to make Maddox forget all about teasing and talking. He moved his hips faster now, grinding more against Jonathan, and making their cocks slide one on top of the other with increased urgency.

“How about this?” he whispered. “What if I’m actually thinking of popping your bad boy’s cherry?”

His fingers hit a homerun, pressing against the warm skin and dipping in just a little. Maddox said nothing, at this point letting out nothing but small grunts and strangled cries. As revenge, Maddox kissed him to shut him up while moving his cock over his harder and harder, in punishing thrusts. Jonathan did his best to keep his middle finger right against the entrance to Maddox's hot as a furnace hole. Warming up to what idea? He was scorching hot while Jonathan teased him about being the guy to take it like that.

Not that he didn't think of Maddox being the perfect guy to save him from the likely fate of dying a virgin. He had thought of it while masturbating. The mere imagined picture of that hard cock sinking inside him, making him crazy, had been enough to send him over the edge on numerous occasions, during his sleepless nights. Maddox wasn't the only one incapable of getting much rest lately.

Suddenly, Maddox changed the angle, and his glans slid over Jonathan's, changing the game. A short, intense shot of arousal flashed through his brain. It was too late when he realized that he was a goner, and he had just lost to the notorious Mad Dawg.

Jonathan came with small huffs and moans, biting his bottom lip and throwing his head back. Maddox just made it worse, no, better, no, worse, by biting his neck and claiming him as his body shuddered in release.

"Fuck yeah," Maddox whispered and pushed himself back.

He was so beautiful like that, sweaty hair in his eyes, his muscles taut like springs, his hand moving over his erection faster and faster.

Jonathan lay there in defeat, breathing hard and still shaking from that insane climax.

"Can I shoot on your balls?" Maddox asked, biting his lower lip and looking over Jonathan's body. "Oh, fuck, I'm gonna shoot on your balls."

Jonathan had no power to protest as Maddox's warm cum landed on his ball sac. He let out a few more gasps as Maddox brushed the head of his cock against the skin there, spreading his cum around. He was claiming him in a way, even without fucking him.

And he had no qualms about it.

"Stay here, I'm going to get some tissues," Maddox warned.

Jonathan watched as Maddox staggered around. Without thinking, he began touching his sac, enjoying the feeling of having all that cum spread around. And then, he brought his fingers to his lips and tasted Maddox just as he had been dreaming of.

“I’m glad to see you’re no longer thinking that my cum is something radioactive,” Maddox stated as he came back with a bunch of tissues. “Wait,” he stopped abruptly, “were you eating my cum just now?”

Jonathan froze. “No,” he denied.

Maddox’s face lit up with a huge grin. “You totally were. How is it?” he asked excitedly.

“Taste it yourself, don’t ask me,” Jonathan said quickly.

Maddox laughed and jumped on the bed. “Nah, but maybe I’ll have a bit of yours.” With that, he leaned over and took one of Jonathan’s nipples into his mouth. Then he smacked his lips. “You had a bit there. Fucking A shooter, aren’t you?”

Jonathan no longer had it in him to protest. “I should go,” he said meekly.

“Wait,” Maddox said while wiping him slowly. “The thing with Hanna. She always wanted someone to talk to about what she really liked. That’s why I told her about your Ray since I knew from Dex what kind of books he’s into. Just so you know. And yeah, I was jealous and wanted to make sure I didn’t have to go against your roommate, too. Or start wearing glasses and striped polo shirts.”

Jonathan chuckled. “Striped polo shirts? Is that the latest fashion among guys who are into illegal fights?”

“What illegal fights?”

Jonathan blinked. So maybe, just maybe, he had taken whatever BS Xpress was serving too much ad litteram. Maddox, with his big puppy eyes, couldn’t be into that. He didn’t give off that kind of vibe. “Never mind. I’m still mad at you for that Hanna thing. Pray that she makes Ray happy or else.”

“Or else what? Are you going to drop by for another cock fight?” Maddox gave him a lewd once over. “I’d say that you had your ass handed to you.”

“Yours wasn’t bad either,” Jonathan threw at him, along with a smirk that he hoped was suggestive enough.

“Shut up, slave. You’re it for the entire month.”

“I’m shaking.” It was good to have his wits back.

“No pulling out, Hamilton,” Maddox warned.

“All right. Bring it on, Kingsley.” Jonathan was pretty sure this bout of courage would wear off the moment he was out the door, but, for now, it served him to play it cool in front of the other.

Especially since Maddox was pretty cute when he didn't appear all sure of himself.

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All right, so that had been a fucking amazing experience, Maddox thought as he accompanied Jonathan to the door, all the while sending pointed looks at his friends who were following them with their eyes like the circus had just arrived in town. Fortunately, even Rusty held his tongue, which was a blessing, no matter how you looked at it.

"I'll call you," he told Jonathan, fighting the urge to give the guy one last kiss for the road, right there, in front of his buddies.

They would make sure he never lived it down and tease him about being cock-whipped for all eternity. In truth, he was ass-whipped and cock-whipped and Jonathan-whipped, but that wasn't something he would enjoy being teased over.

As soon as the door closed behind Jonathan, however, Rusty wasted not one precious moment. "Did you guys fuck?"

Maddox turned toward his friends to face the music. "No, what the hell? What am I, a two-pump chump?"

Kane stared at him like he was growing another head. "You were in there with him for like forty minutes."

"And we only heard yelling for like five," Dex chimed in.

Maddox shrugged. "Yeah, time flies," he said.

"What do you mean?" Rusty asked. "What did you guys do in there? And how come we didn't have to call an ambulance?"

"Ambulance?" Maddox asked, blinking and trying to figure out what Rusty meant by that.

Dex supplied the explanation. "Your sweetheart walked in here, ready to commit murder. Forgive us for worrying about your ass."

"Ha, if you were so concerned, how come you didn't check on me?" Maddox crossed his arms and studied his friends in turn.

Kane smirked, Dex wiggled his eyebrows. Rusty put his hand up. "I did. But after listening to you two smooching and moaning like dogs in heat for like two minutes, Kane came and dragged me back downstairs. I would have stayed there, you know? And I would've come to the rescue, just so you know, 'cause you're my bro."

Maddox ran one hand over his face. “Kane, I can’t believe I’m saying this, but thank you for that.”

“Hey,” Rusty protested, “I was the one willing to listen to your gay smooching for like half an hour.”

“Yeah,” Maddox confirmed, “of course. Just thank Kane for not letting you do it. Hey, what is that stupid digital rag saying about me lately?” He changed the topic quickly before Rusty had a chance to ask for more explanations and probably an entire step-by-step recounting of the events. “That I’m into some kind of illegal fights?”

Dex shrugged. “I don’t read that shit. Ask Rusty.”

“Illegal fights?” Rusty raised his shoulders and let them drop. “Maybe, but I don’t remember it all. Like cock fights?”

“Yeah,” Maddox grinned, “just like cock fights.”

He walked back to his room, fending off his friends’ demands for more details by telling them that he needed to take a shower. He did need one, since he practically reeked of sweat and sex, but also because he had to check on something that Jonathan must have triggered with his wandering fingers.

## *Chapter Twelve – Maddox Says*

He groaned in delight as the warm water poured down his back. Well, it was now or never, or maybe it could be later, but he very much wanted to try it right now just to see how it went. Using a bit of shower gel to coat his fingers, Maddox reached for his behind and pushed in a smidge. Well, it wasn't like he had never been probed a little around there by kinky fingers, but the girls he had been with had never gone further than that. Plus, at the time, he had been focused on other things and thought of just making them happy by letting them play with his ass a little.

Yet, none of those times compared to how Jonathan's long elegant fingers had moved around his hole, teasing him and making him want to buck his hips into them just to get more inside. And, in all honesty, Maddox had tried hard not to come right then because he had needed to win that fight so much.

Without a doubt, he would have Jonathan finger his butt, especially since the guy appeared to like the idea, but first, he wanted to check things out for himself. He breathed in deeply and pushed his fingers further. Hmm, that was quite pleasant. Maybe fit in another finger? It was a little bit uncomfortable, but if he made things slick enough, it was starting to grow on him.

Maddox pulled at his cock, enjoying the sensation of having it lengthen gradually. The best thing about it all was that he now had plenty of real jerk off material since Jonathan had finally accepted that his fate was to hook up with him and have crazy amazing sex.

Damn, it was going to be a glorious month, Maddox decided as he moved his fingers in and out of his ass at a steady pace, while the hand on his cock was moving to the rhythm. Jonathan was gorgeous with his mouth slightly open, his eyes at half-mast and his throat exposed, while moaning and coming. That was the kind of thing Maddox wanted to take a picture of and use as his home screen. No, maybe not, since he didn't want other people to see it by accident, and only he alone was entitled to see Jonathan like that.

And the freaking beautiful thing was that the guy was a virgin on top of it all. Maddox could barely wait to get together with Jonathan again so that they could explore everything together. So, Jonathan had said that he didn't want to get fucked in the ass, but that wouldn't stop Maddox from pumping up the charm and making him yield. Seriously, he had no idea who he was going against; Maddox wanted him so badly that even now, after barely letting him go back to his place, he wished for nothing else but to see him again.

And not just see him. Maddox let his fantasy fly. How would Jonathan look on all fours, pushing his lovely ass back and asking without words to get fucked? His cock twitched like crazy in his hand.

“Do you want that, buddy? Want some of that awesome ass?”

And how would it be with Jonathan on top, kissing him and acting all domineering as he seemed to be now and then, and even...

Maddox closed his eyes and groaned. Did he want Jonathan's cock in his ass? Maybe he did, if the shot of pleasure coming from his behind as he pushed his fingers in and out was any indication. Only that Jonathan's cock was bigger than a couple of fingers, which meant that he would have to work to get it inside.

Was that even doable? Maddox didn't know, but hell if his naughty mind didn't urge him to try it. Would Jonathan be gentle while fucking him? Would he be shy? Would Maddox have to get on top and impale his ass onto his cock just to convince him that it would be good?

Fuck, that would be hot, to dominate Jonathan like that and coax him into everything. But first, Maddox decided, he'd see what that ass was all about. His fingers moved slowly again, as he edged, prolonging the mind-blowing sensations coursing through his body. He would have Jonathan on his back, and he would catch every moan and look of surprise in those pretty eyes, as Maddox became his first man ever.

And then, Jonathan would wrap his hands around him and pull him close so that they could kiss, and he would whisper 'fuck me, please'...

Maddox grunted and began spraying the wall in front of him with white ropes that seemed to keep on going to the point that he was breathless. He rested his head against the tiles and took mouthful after mouthful of air.

If one month of hooking up with Jonathan weren't enough, he'd have another big ass challenge in front of him. He would have to convince Jonathan to go out with him for real, regardless of what he was saying about good guys not dating bad boys and all that.

His mind was getting clearer as his climax ebbed. Maddox began to wash his body energetically. Why the hell should he even wait for the month to pass? He would start dating Jonathan right away, only that, as with everything with that guy, he would have to be clever about it.

Yeah, that sounded like a perfect plan.

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"Ray?" Jonathan called tentatively as soon as he entered.

*Sorry about everything, I went to protect your honor and ended up losing mine.*

As much as he thought those to be the correct words to say, he doubted he would be able to let them leave his tongue. To his relief, the suite was empty, and there was no trace of Ray and Hanna anywhere.

He went straight for the shower, his mind a mess. Why had he accepted Maddox's crazy challenge? Now his word of honor was at stake because he had just said 'yes' to a month of mind-blowing sex.

Why did he have such an uncanny ability to do the exact opposite of what he wanted to do? At the start of the year, he had told himself that he would not get involved with another bad boy in his life, and there he was, dancing to Maddox's tune like a well-trained pet.

He bit his lips as his imagination took him out the window with it. Suddenly conjured in his mind, images of Maddox caressing his throat and telling him something about how nice he would look with a collar came unbidden.

But, he struggled, he wouldn't be that guy. He let the shower continue to run as his hand moved fast on his cock. If he had any say about it, he would show Maddox that maybe he was the guy gagging for a collar, not him. Especially since his hole was so nice and hot.

He had spoken the truth that time, about not knowing whether he was a top or a bottom. With Maddox, he realized helplessly, he wanted to be everything. He wanted to be pushed into the bed, face first and rammed deep and hard from behind, just as much as he wanted to give Maddox some nice rimming and then put his cock inside that scorching hot hole and punish it gently for all the transgressions its owner was guilty of.

Maddox was beautiful in the throes of orgasm, as he could clearly remember from no longer than a half an hour ago. Why did he have to be so perfect, and yet so wrong for him? Jonathan didn't even dare to let his mind go there. But he was alone with his hand, and who said that having fantasies involving a bad boy who was also straight was forbidden?

The way that naughty hole had twitched around the tip of his finger didn't indicate that it belonged to a straight boy. Jonathan knew all too well how dangerous it was to indulge in such fantasies, but he couldn't help it.

What did he truly want? If he were honest, he wanted everything. Maddox was cruel to taunt him with that word, dangling it in front of him. Yes, he did want everything, and not just for a month. The thought alone was so scary, but his body didn't care about his worries and anxieties.

What would it be like to wake up next to someone like Maddox? To see those pretty gray eyes first thing in the morning? And to have sex right away, their hands too eager for one another to allow them to care about anything else?

*You're a hopeless romantic.*

Jonathan blinked at the memory. That had been his doom, right? Or maybe no one was allowed to tell him what he was? He rebelled and dragged his mind from that time to the present day,

when the sexiest boy he had ever met in his life wanted him to be his slave for a month, whatever that entailed.

According to Maddox, it entailed a lot of things, among which anal sex was just one of the many. Not that Jonathan wouldn't settle for the simplest things, like kissing and touching each other everywhere. He moaned as he remembered Maddox's lips on his neck, on his nipples, on his mouth, and how he was claimed when the guy had decided to come over his balls.

And Maddox's taste on his tongue... Jonathan squeezed his eyes shut hard and began jerking off frantically. The month that started tomorrow would be his chance to taste Maddox in all possible ways, lick the cookie bowl clean, because he was insane and couldn't stop himself from wanting the impossible if it killed him.

The force of his climax took him by surprise. He was no longer in control of his body, that hard he was coming, and he had just fantasied about it all.

What would it be like when they tried the real thing? He would die from too much pleasure, but he would die a happy man, so probably nothing else really mattered.

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Since he had promised, he began making Ray's favorite. It could be that Ray was on a date with Hanna already, and he wouldn't be in the mood to eat when he came back, but Jonathan really needed to busy his mind and hands with something.

His phone rang, taking him by surprise. He hesitated when he saw Maddox's name on the screen. Why wasn't he sending texts like everyone else? Did they really need to have a conversation right now? Couldn't it wait?

No, he wouldn't ignore him. That would make him a coward, and he wasn't one. Jonathan brought the phone to his ear. "Yes?" he asked smoothly.

"What are you doing tonight?"

"I'm going to study," Jonathan said promptly.

"No, wrong answer. It's Sunday."

"There's no rule about not studying on Sundays," Jonathan replied.

"Did you already forget about our arrangement?"

Jonathan exhaled. It took all his willpower not to think that Maddox wanted him right now, or at least tonight, which was too soon, and he wasn't mentally prepared to meet his doom again. "No, of course not. But I thought my month of slavery would start tomorrow."

“Nope. Tonight.”

“All right. So what do you have in mind? Do you want me to pick up your shirts from the cleaning service?” Yes, as long as he could joke, he would be fine.

“No, they don’t work on Sundays, unlike you, little freak.”

“Little? There’s nothing little about me,” Jonathan protested.

“Don’t I know it?” Maddox’s voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper.

“I meant that I’m six point four,” Jonathan insisted, as his cheeks began to warm up.

“Yeah, annoying,” Maddox declared.

“What? How can my height be annoying?”

“Can we bicker over pizza tonight? I’m taking you out.”

“Out? Like on a date?” Jonathan asked, suddenly alarmed well beyond threat levels.

“No. Like out. Like hanging out. You know what? You have no choice. Maddox says.”

“Maddox says? Are we playing a game now?”

“Yes, mine. I’ll come pick you up at seven.”

“Okay. My place is--”

“I know where it is. When I have a crush on someone, I do my best to learn everything publicly available first.”

A crush? Jonathan fell silent.

“So study while you can,” Maddox added quickly. “I’m not taking ‘no’ for an answer, and I’m sure even you eat pizza.”

“What do you mean by that?” Jonathan barely mustered the courage to sound scandalized.

“Dunno. You look like a caviar type of guy.”

“For the record, I’m not crazy about caviar.”

“Great. So you’ll eat pizza with me?”

“Yes, of course. Will it be somewhere close?”

“Not really, but we’ll take my car.”

“All right.”

“All right.”

Another moment of awkward silence followed.

“Bye,” Maddox said first.

“Goodbye,” Jonathan returned.

He stared at his phone like it could give him some proper answers. A date? A crush?

His heart wasn't ready. Only his body, which lately, had a mind of his own.

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“You're going on a date?” Kane interrogated him the moment he put the phone down.

“Are you spying on me?” Maddox glowered, half in the mood to tell Kane to fuck off. He had just confessed to Jonathan about having a crush on him, and the other had been awkward and unnervingly quiet after that. Was he misreading the signals? Jonathan definitely wanted him, and heck, Maddox was beyond certain that all sex between them would be over the top amazing, but what about everything else?

“Hello, this is the kitchen and it's not like you put up a ‘do not disturb’ sign,” Kane said.

Maddox narrowed his eyes. “Just how long have you been there, eavesdropping on me?”

Kane grinned. “Long enough to hear you confessing that you're crushing on him. Well, it was clumsy, yet a bit endearing. Did you knock him off his feet yet?”

Maddox scowled. “I don't think so.”

Kane patted him on the shoulder. “Too bad. Because I think so.”

Was it a good thing to have high hopes? Maddox turned toward Kane to see if his buddy was just joking, but no, there was no sign of that. “Do you mean that?”

“Totally. I mean, just a couple of hours ago, the guy comes in, ready to bite your head off. Half an hour later, he leaves with an expression on his face like he's just found God.”

“Ew, I'm not that much into religious stuff,” Maddox said and scrunched up his nose.

Kane smacked the back of his hand against his belly. “I'm talking about another type of god, obviously. A sex god,” he added with a smirk.

Maddox couldn't stop smiling at that. “Do you think that I impressed him that much?”

“You shouldn’t be asking me that. But hey, he looked completely different when he walked out of your room. Never seen such a quick transformation in my life, and Louise is forcing me to watch makeovers with her all the time.”

“Like how?” Maddox insisted, thirsty for more confirmation.

Kane made a face like he had just licked a lemon. “Come on, man, do you really need me to do an impersonation of your boyfriend after getting his dick sucked to convince you?”

“I didn’t suck his dick,” Maddox retorted.

“You didn’t?” Kane was surprised. “Frankly, that was the face of a guy who just got his dick sucked.”

“I had no idea there was a particular face guys made when someone gave them head,” Maddox said.

“Then what the hell did you two do if you didn’t fuck and didn’t suck each other off either? And I thought sex between two dudes was supposed to be simpler and straight to the point.”

“Not telling.” Maddox stuck his tongue out to provoke Kane. That earned him a jab in his ribs that made him grunt and almost bite it. “Hey watch it, I need this tonight,” he complained, twisting the words while he let his tongue lol out.

“Why? To put it in his ass?” Kane joked.

Hmm, that wasn’t such a bad idea, actually, Maddox thought. And dick sucking had to be on the list, too, because why the hell not? Jonathan had said something about not liking it, but being the virgin that he was, he probably had just sucked like half a dick once and hurriedly decided that it wasn’t for him. Plus, he wouldn’t protest that much if he were the receiving side, right?

Kane’s chuckle stopped his fantasies mid-track. “You’re totally thinking of licking his butt, aren’t you?”

“Hey, aren’t you a bit too curious?”

Kane shrugged. “I lick Louise’s butt all the time.”

Maddox felt his ears perking up. That was something he had never tried, boy or girl. “And does she like it?”

“She loves it,” Kane admitted with a large grin.

“So how do you do it?”

Kane pushed his hands into his pockets and started walking away. “Why don’t you figure it out, lover boy? Although I think you can do as little as touch Jonathan’s pinky with yours, and he’d be ready to come in his pants.”

“For real?” Maddox asked, staring at Kane’s retreating back.

His friend threw him a knowing look over his shoulder. “Don’t let it go to your head. That guy’s helplessly smitten with you, it’s beyond funny.”

“Hey, don’t laugh at him,” Maddox warned.

Kane waved. “Wouldn’t dream of. And I’m too busy laughing at you.”

He was too lazy right now to go after Kane and jump on his back as revenge. Or too much in the mood to just go to his room and dream of Jonathan until seven.

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“That smells so nice,” Hanna was the first to speak the moment she and Ray stepped through the door.

“I hope you’ll still think that after you have some,” Jonathan offered with a smile.

She and Ray had their fingers linked and the same happy smile on their faces.

“It’s my favorite,” Ray said, “and Jonathan is an amazing cook.”

“Then I can barely wait to try it,” Hanna said.

“Well, I’ll leave you kids to it, as I already ate,” Jonathan said. “I also have to study.”

What he needed was to lock himself in his room and think of what he would do tonight. Maddox had asked him out on a date, without a doubt, but what if it were all a game? Even if it weren’t, he argued with himself, Maddox was straight. After this whole bi-curiosity or whatever it was wore off, he would be back to business as usual, and Jonathan wouldn’t hold it against him.

Straight guys were just meant to carve a hole in his chest and leave it there for him to struggle to fill it up. Agreeing to Maddox’s terms seemed like such a bad idea right now, but it wasn’t like he could back down. If he got hurt at any time throughout the month that started tonight, not tomorrow, it would only be his own fault.

Jonathan clenched his fists. Yes, it was always his fault. With Drew, it had been his fault; with his parents, it had been his fault. And with Maddox, it would be just a classic case of history repeating itself if he didn’t keep his wits about him and took a little more care of his heart than he had ever done before.

But at least that meant that he was in charge of his own self; whatever happened, it would be on his terms, too. Maddox wanted to play? Fine. But Jonathan would approach it in the same spirit, nothing more, nothing less.

And being a hopeless romantic was overrated, anyway. Who was he saving himself for? The very notion was beyond daft. Maddox was an excellent lover; lack of experience with boys notwithstanding, he'd done a great job so far knocking Jonathan off his feet with nothing but kisses and barely there skin contact.

Barely there? The contradiction rising in his mind made him shudder with the now familiar jolt whenever he made the mistake of thinking of Maddox for too long. Their interactions were electric, out of this world, or at least his world.

All in all, experimenting with Maddox couldn't be that bad, as long as he guarded his heart, not giving it away when it wasn't wanted.

The knock on his room door took him by surprise. One of the books he was supposed to learn something important from had been open in front of him for at least half an hour and he hadn't managed to read one line. "Come in," he said.

Ray put his head in and grinned at him. "That was delicious, JJ. Hanna's in love with you."

Jonathan offered a fond smile. "Doesn't that make you jealous?"

Ray shrugged. "Not at all. But listen, um," he hesitated for a moment, "what did you and Maddox talk about after you stormed out the door? Hanna is awesome, and it's because of him I'm getting to know her now."

Jonathan sighed. Count on Ray to think only happy thoughts of everything. "Well, I had to tell him what he did was wrong."

Ray nodded. "And what did he say?"

The question came naturally, but Jonathan found himself mute for a couple of moments. He returned his attention to the open book. "Not much," he replied quickly. "Just that, um, practically, he told me that he pointed her to you because you two have the same interests."

Ray leaned against the doorjamb. Jonathan wasn't looking at him directly, but he noticed everything from the corner of one eye.

"JJ, is Maddox your bad boy?"

Oh, the dreaded question. Jonathan stared at the book fiercely. Chemical formulas were suddenly Chinese. "What do you mean?"

"Come on, you can tell me. I'm your bestie, remember?"

“It’s... all right, it’s nothing. He’s just fooling around, driving me crazy,” Jonathan said quickly.

“And are you also fooling around, driving him crazy?” Ray asked promptly.

“No.” He scowled and turned the page.

“I think you do. You two were suspiciously MIA at the same time during a certain party. Hanna told me that all the girls are talking about how Maddox might be in love for the first time ever.”

“Ah, well,” Jonathan said and pressed his fingers against his temples, “I guess he’ll get over it in no time.”

“Oh, wow,” Ray’s voice dropped, “you’re totally not denying it. Don’t worry, I’ll keep my mouth shut. Until you’re ready to talk about it, of course.”

It was too late to realize that he had fallen into Ray’s trap way too easily. “Nothing’s going on.”

Ray’s laughter was his punishment. “I should have known there was something fishy with you two, ever since that insta-hate episode. I mean, it was electric. Crush at first sight.”

“Ha, don’t tell me you’ve had it figured out all along,” Jonathan countered.

“No, but what reason could he have to get Hanna to test my heterosexuality, unless he was interested in you? Gosh, I must have been like a thorn in his side at that party, while I stood glued to you.”

Ray was incredibly smart, and although he seemed aloof now and then, and an airhead, he really knew how to read a situation.

“Maddox is straight, Ray,” Jonathan said in a strained voice. “Nothing will come of it.”

“I suppose that remains to be seen,” Ray said. “I’d stay and pester you some more, but it looks like you’re working hard at pretending that you’re studying, and I’m also in the process of getting a girlfriend. Fingers crossed,” he added with a large grin. “Wish me luck.”

“I doubt you need it. She seems like a sweet girl.”

“And Maddox seems like an awesome guy. Don’t let him get away,” Ray threw that little piece of advice on his way out.

Jonathan dragged his hands over his face and groaned in exasperation. If Ray could put two and two together that easily, what would stop others from doing the same? Maddox at the very least confided in his friends, and who could tell whether or not they were the gossipy kind?

Maddox was smart to have scheduled their little hanging out at a place off-campus. That was the easiest way to fend off rumors. Jonathan didn't want to live through something like that again. Maddox wasn't Drew, but scandals could bring out the worst in people, right?

He stared at his book again with a forlorn look. He should have never agreed to become Maddox's toy. They had both been too oblivious to what that entailed, so maybe it was for the best to use tonight to make the other back out of their little agreement of his own accord.

Surely, Maddox was a man of reason.

Surely.

### *Chapter Thirteen – Meat Lovers*

“So, what’s your favorite?” Maddox asked while throwing him a tiny smile.

“Um, what?” Jonathan sat rigidly in his seat, after putting on the safety belt. Hours after his decision, and he still had no idea how to start a difficult conversation with his date.

No, it wasn’t a date, what was he even thinking? Regardless of how he had gone with a dark purple shirt and grey dress pants because they looked good on him, and how he even debated what wristwatch to wear, he wasn’t supposed to be on a date. Maddox looked amazing as always, although his long-sleeved light blue shirt was paired up with what looked like brand new jeans. Maybe, just maybe, he had put as much work into looking good for this as he had.

“What’s your favorite pizza?” Maddox insisted as he rested his hands on the wheel with the practiced ease of someone who did that a lot.

Jonathan knew how to drive, of course, but there had never been many occasions for him to do so. His eyes rested on Maddox’s hands. He loved them because they looked so strong, a bit square but solid. And he knew exactly how the tips of those fingers felt on his skin. Stopping the small shiver coursing through him was a tough task.

“I don’t really have a favorite.”

“Really? What is it going to be then? Give me a hint. Vegan? Pineapple on top?”

“No, no, nothing outrageous,” Jonathan protested. “Anything with meat and mushrooms, I suppose.”

Maddox remained silent for a moment, and then burst into laughter. “Omigod, don’t tell me you’ve never had pizza!”

“I surely have,” Jonathan replied, hoping that his indignation appeared real enough. All right, so maybe not in places called pizza joints, and during his falling out with his family, he had still preferred to cook at home instead of going out to eat so that experience had eluded him thus far.

Maddox slammed his hands against the wheel a few times and laughed some more. “I’m totally popping your cherry on some truly delicious pizza tonight.”

He gave Jonathan a wink and a naughty grin.

“Just keep your eyes on the road,” Jonathan mumbled while making himself little in his seat. “How far do we need to travel?”

“As far we need to go for pizza that will take your breath away.”

“I would much prefer it to fill my stomach instead,” Jonathan replied tersely.

“Hey, why are you so tense?” Maddox asked as his attention focused back on the wheel and road ahead. “I’m not going to jump you while we’re in the car driving.”

“Ah, so you’ll wait until we’re parked?”

Maddox burst into laughter. “You’re a riot, man, a total riot. It’s just my luck.”

“How so?”

“Well, if you really want me to tell you, here it is. I bet this prickly personality of yours is the absolute reason why your sexy ass is still a virgin to this day. I mean, come on, you were enrolled in an all-boys college, right?”

Jonathan nodded, slightly confused. What was Maddox getting at?

“And are you telling me that not one of them thought of getting into your pants? At least a little? That college must be either a secret place for eunuchs or enroll the most heterosexual guys on the planet. But of course, since you grow cactus thorns the moment someone gets near you, they must have been just wusses who didn’t dare to take things further.”

Jonathan pursed his lips. Had he lacked attention before? No, not necessarily. He had just chosen badly, and that was the thing that wasn’t supposed to happen again. Right. He needed to get back to his original plan and find a way to explain to Maddox why it was a bad idea to fool around together.

“You’re so quiet. Did you break many hearts back there?” Maddox asked. “They must have expelled you on the grounds of being a heartbreaker.”

“Oh, shut up, Kingsley, I wasn’t expelled. For the record, you’re not cute right now. And I didn’t break anyone’s heart.”

More like the other way around and more. What else had Drew broken? His reputation? His family ties? No, he told himself stubbornly; it had been nothing but his fault, and his fault alone. As long as he kept telling himself that, he would remain in charge. People who held themselves accountable for their mistakes were in control of whatever happened to them.

“Okay, it looks like someone’s grouchy when they’re hungry,” Maddox commented cheerfully. “Even you’ll have to smile once you taste this pizza.”

“I smile all the time,” Jonathan said as he tried to chase away the bad memories. Difficult conversations to be had or not, they could still have fun.

And he very much wanted to taste that pizza, since Maddox kept praising it.

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There was something off about Jonathan tonight. He was guarded, a bit unhappy, even. Maddox wanted nothing more than to ask him directly what was wrong, but the only thing stopping him was that he doubted he would get an honest answer. He didn't know Jonathan well, but hell if he didn't want to get there.

Jonathan seemed a lot like someone used to keeping a lot to himself. Twenty-year-olds weren't supposed to be so serious, and now that Maddox had a chance to look at him from up close, he could see how his cold demeanor could be mistaken for arrogance. It wasn't that, though. Jonathan must have had some unhappy experiences in his life.

So, it was all the more a win to see his face lighting up as he took in the colorful pictures on the menu. Behind that façade, there was a young man who could love passionately, as Maddox would attest to anyone asking, and it was that part of Jonathan he wanted to drag out and keep out there so that the sun could shine upon it.

"What do you think?" he asked with a grin.

"There are just so many choices," Jonathan replied, barely holding in his excitement. "I think I'll take this one."

"The Meat Lover," Maddox drawled. "Apropos much?"

Jonathan's eyes grew wide and then he pulled the menu closer. He was just too adorable when he got flustered like that. "I'll choose something else."

"No, no, no," Maddox snatched the menu from him. "Come on, let's face it." He dropped his voice low and leaned over the table. "We're both meat lovers."

Jonathan blushed and threw a few alarmed looks around. Maddox allowed him to scan their surroundings, but it was more than just amazing pizza that brought him back to this place. The tables were arranged in such a fashion that patrons couldn't easily spy on each other. Plus, the plush sofa seats were to die for, and the intimate atmosphere allowed for a bit of wandering hands when the need grew too high.

"All right," Jonathan said brusquely, seemingly trying hard to get a grip and pretend he was the pretentious person many people had to have mistaken him for. "We'll see if this lives up to expectations. I only have you to blame for any disappointment I might have to endure."

"I'm willing to take my punishment, as long as you're honest about what you're really thinking."

Jonathan gave him a sharp look. So, he understood.

Maddox ventured to ask the question he wanted. "What's with you? You look like you're about to jump out of your skin."

A pursing of the lips was the immediate answer. “Maddox,” Jonathan breathed out, “do you really think it’s a good idea?”

“What? Eating pizza?”

“Come on, don’t make me spell it out for you. You know what I mean.”

Ah, so he was getting cold feet a little. Maddox could work with that. He leaned over the table. “Hamilton, we have the hots for each other. Admit it.”

Jonathan looked sideways for a moment. “Yes,” he said quietly.

“So, what’s wrong with going for it?”

This time, a low groan followed. “You make it sound so easy. Don’t you care?”

Ah, so Jonathan was still wary of being seen with him. Could it be because of that ‘good guys don’t date bad boys’ thing?

Maddox licked his lips and smiled. “What I care about is that I have you to myself for a month.”

“Will that be enough to satisfy your curiosity or whatever this is?” Jonathan asked, his voice as low as before.

“Don’t pretend you don’t want it, too. You’re really hurting my feelings.”

Jonathan looked around again as if he were expecting something. “People talk,” he said through his teeth.

“So let them talk. I don’t care.” Maddox shrugged to make a point.

“But I do.”

So, that was indeed what this was all about. “Fine,” he said, working his jaw a little. “Do you want me to pretend not to know you in school?” He knew he was coming across as rude, but all jokes aside, he did feel upset over Jonathan not wanting to be seen with him. It had to be because of his reputation, for sure, and there was nothing he could do about that. It wasn’t like he could go back in time and erase all the hookups and fooling around.

That meant that the mission was a bit more challenging than he thought. He had one month to make Jonathan change his mind about him. In the meantime, Jonathan would have to endure all the punishments Maddox came up with because, seriously, he was a bit of a prick, no matter how sexy and adorable.

“Let’s not be too extreme,” Jonathan eventually replied.

“What should we be?” Maddox asked pointedly.

“Normal,” came the sharp reply.

Maddox leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms. “Did you come here to break up with me even though we’re not dating?”

Jonathan let out a small huff. “I’m just trying to be reasonable. Do you even realize what you’re getting yourself into?”

“Fully well. I want to fuck the person that keeps fucking with my head.”

Jonathan’s cheeks turned pink in an instant. Maddox felt so pissed that he wanted to grab him, walk out of there, push him inside the car, and drive somewhere he could show him what words didn’t appear to be capable of explaining.

“A guy,” Jonathan said slowly, like it pained him to talk. “You want to fuck a guy.”

Maddox shrugged. “So? It looks to me like you’re more scared of being gay than me.”

“Are you gay?”

“Ever since I met you.”

“There’s no such thing --”

“Bullshit.”

Jonathan fell silent and cleared his throat. Only then, Maddox noticed that a server had stopped by their table, waiting to take their order. He reined in his desire to give Jonathan another precious piece of his mind and turned toward the server with a smile.

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Nothing was going as planned, Jonathan thought, feeling a tiny bit panicked. Maddox could be fierce when he wanted, and that was enough to make him want to yield, no doubt about it. It all boiled down, as usual, to his obsession with cocky guys who knew – or thought they knew – what they wanted.

They said nothing more as they started eating. Jonathan asked politely for utensils when the server came around. First, he cut a small piece, and then, he started to chew slowly. The burst of flavor hit his taste buds like a wrecking ball.

“Oh my God,” he muttered.

Maddox grinned at him. “I know, right? But hell, I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone eating pizza with a fork and knife.”

Unlike him, Maddox had folded a slice and was biting into it with gusto. Jonathan blushed at the thought of being so out of place. Not that he didn't know how most people lived, but there were just so many things that had been imprinted on him from a young age that he couldn't shake off overnight.

Yet, there was a first time for everything. He put the utensils down and imitated Maddox. Somehow, it tasted even better like that.

"This is definitely worth the trouble," Jonathan said after he swallowed.

Maddox narrowed his eyes. "The trouble of spending the evening with me?"

"No, the trouble of having to drive up here," Jonathan contradicted him.

It was troubling that Maddox was upset with him. As carefree as he was and with that happy disposition, he probably didn't realize that he would be stigmatized the moment others learned that they were fooling around together. That meant that it fell to Jonathan to ensure that their secret was as heavily guarded as possible.

"Please, don't be mad at me," he started. "But I assume we both want to have a life still, after this month is up."

Maddox blinked a few times like he couldn't understand what he was saying.

"Just, could we keep it a secret?" he added.

Maddox relaxed. While he seemed to finally get what this was all about, there was still something about his sly smile that was a bit unsettling. "Sure, why not?"

With nonchalance, Maddox reached for Jonathan's glass and drank through the straw. His eyelids dropped lazily and his tongue twirled around it for a bit before he put the glass back down.

Jonathan made an effort to swallow. Was it his fault that he interpreted everything Maddox said or did as sexual? Definitely. "You have your own. What am I supposed to drink now?" he asked, hoping that his voice sounded cutting enough to prevent Maddox from repeating the same move.

Maddox snorted. "I've had my tongue down your throat and plan to have it there again for like dozens of times. Don't tell me you're afraid of germs now. I thought we were past that."

Jonathan nodded and grabbed his glass with a sigh. At the same time, he made the mistake of letting his other hand lie on the table. Maddox took him by surprise when he covered his hand with his. It was warm and reassuring.

Such were the ways that led him to pain and misery.

He pulled his hand away, shifting in his seat.

“Aren’t you jumpy?” Maddox commented. “Are you sure you’re not a coward about hooking up with me? You get like this if I touch as little as your hand.”

That wasn’t it, Jonathan wanted to scream. He wasn’t afraid of hooking up, but of the intimacy and attachment that came with it which, in the end, was bound to leave him hurting all over.

“That’s not true,” he denied and took another sip from his glass.

He was unaware of Maddox moving to sit by his side. The sofa was wide and comfortable, but what wasn’t was how Maddox pressed his thigh against his leg as he maneuvered himself close.

“Um, what’s going on?”

Maddox placed his chin on Jonathan’s shoulder forcing him to turn his head. He regretted that decision right away as their mouths ended up dangerously close in that position. He looked straight ahead quickly. Equally dangerous, if not more so, was how Maddox’s hand wrapped around the inside of his thigh, making him draw in a sharp breath.

“Maddox,” he whispered with urgency, “what are you doing?”

The other’s hot breath tickled his ear. “Usually, my dates look a lot happier when I take them out. I couldn’t stand just sitting across from you when I could come over here and make you smile.”

“You’re not making me smile.” Jonathan panted rapidly, as Maddox’s hand moved upward, stopping less than an inch away from the most important point of interest. “Are you going to have us thrown out of here for indecent exposure? I would have thought you’d like to come back another time.”

Mercifully, Maddox moved his hand away, and then, he picked up the slice from Jonathan’s plate.

“You’re really something,” he mumbled. “Just get back to your place, and I promise I’ll keep smiling like a toothpaste ad for as long as you want me to.”

“Maddox? Jonathan?”

Both their heads snapped up at the sound of that voice. Connor was there, staring at them like he couldn’t believe his eyes.

“What are you guys doing here?”

Jonathan elbowed Maddox discreetly to make him move at least slightly away. That couldn’t look good. “We were working on our project and decided to have a bite,” he replied quickly.

Maddox looked incapable of taking a hint and wrapped one arm around the back of his seat, a hairsbreadth away from touching him. “I kept telling Jonathan that he had to try this amazing pizza,” he drawled. “So I thought I’d bring him here.”

“Cool. I’m with my buddies, so if you want to hang out together --” Connor pointed at another table.

“We were just leaving,” Maddox interrupted him. “This project is really frying our brains, so we need to get back to work.”

“Sure. Nice seeing you two.” Connor offered Jonathan a smile and a wink. “Especially you, Jonathan.”

He responded with a plastic smile of his own. He was barely out of earshot when he turned toward Maddox. “What the hell? Why didn’t you tell him we were on a date while you were at it?”

Maddox blinked like he was bored. “Do you like that guy or something?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

It was a lie, but right now, he needed to push Maddox away. Connor didn’t look like he got the gist of the situation, but he couldn’t be completely blind.

“Bad choice,” Maddox said.

“Really? Why?”

“He’s boring and obnoxious.”

“Not to me. And I’d like to take my chances with him after our little experiment is over.”

Maddox grabbed his shoulder. “For real? Are you going to cheat on me with him?”

“Cheat on you?” Jonathan asked, utterly terrified by the idea. “No. I won’t argue semantics with you since we’re not dating, but let me make it clear that as long as my agreement with you stands, I will not get together with anyone else. I hope you understand that the same rule applies to you.”

Maddox grinned at him. “Possessive. I like it. And you don’t have to worry about me. I’m all for exclusivity, and I only want you.”

Jonathan groaned and rolled his eyes to hide the effect those words had on him. “Now we’ll have to leave, and I’m barely halfway through my pizza.”

“Just go ahead and eat at your own pace. Connor won’t hold it against me for not telling the truth.”

“You really have everyone wrapped around your little finger, don’t you?”

“Do I have you?” Maddox asked. “Because that’s all that matters to me right now.”

Yes. Yes, he did, but Jonathan had no plans of giving himself away. “Just move back to your seat so that we can finish our meal. You made me crazy praising it, and it’s truly outstanding. I’d hate to leave any behind.”

Maddox shrugged and pulled his plate closer. “Mine has more pepperoni,” he said and moved a slice through the air like an airplane. “Open your mouth and have a taste.”

It was useless to argue with him. After throwing a few more looks around, Jonathan took a bite. Maddox took the next, locking his eyes with him.

He was insane to believe his heart or any other piece of him would survive unscathed for an entire month.

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Maddox had to admit that there was a part of him, a bit sadistic, that enjoyed watching Jonathan squirm. They wanted each other like crazy, so what was the point of denying their mutual attraction? Now, they were on their way back and Jonathan kept stealing nervous looks at him.

“What?” he asked.

“Are we... going to do something tonight?” Jonathan asked in a staccato voice.

Maddox grinned. “And by something, you mean --”

“Sexual things, yes,” Jonathan said quickly.

It was just so much fun to see him fretting like that. It looked like someone had gotten a little worked up about their date, after all. “Dunno. What do you have in mind?”

The reply surprised him. “Take me someplace you like. Somewhere quiet.”

The tall trees were flying by fast as they drove back to Sunny Hill. “Like outdoors or something?”

“Yes, something like that.”

Maddox felt giddy with excitement. This was his third year at Sunny Hill, and he knew the school’s surroundings like the back of his hand. And he had the perfect place in mind. At the next corner, he turned left and took them off the main road. The evening was setting in fast, and

it would surely get a little chilly, but he had a suspicion that they would feel way too hot for the cold to bother them.

He stopped by the side of the lake that already shone silver as a full moon hung above. The engine died, and he turned toward Jonathan. “Fancy a walk?”

“Fancy? Why are you talking like that?”

“Dunno. Everything feels a little fancy with you, is all.”

Jonathan shook his head and got out of the car. Maddox followed his example.

“When the weather is hot, people come here for a quick dip,” he explained. “But I like it because it’s so quiet the rest of the time.”

Jonathan kept his hands in his pockets, and they walked side by side, their shoulders almost touching. They stopped inches from the shore. Jonathan was the first to break the silence. “It’s true. I have the hots for you, Maddox, almost to the point where I think I must be deranged.”

Maddox rested one hand on his shoulder and made him turn so they were facing one another. “If it’s any consolation, same here.”

Jonathan exhaled, a warm breeze caressing Maddox’s face. “So, let’s do this. Let’s burn through it for a month or less.”

“Or less? You’re an optimist or a pessimist. No idea how to read you.”

“I only meant that if you get bored before the month is up --”

“No way that’s going to happen. Come here.”

As on other occasions when they were alone, Jonathan didn’t protest as Maddox grabbed him by the front of his shirt and crushed their lips together. It was as sweet as ever, but even more than that, as Jonathan immediately wrapped his arms around him and lost himself in the kiss.

This time, Maddox planned on taking things a little further than a bit of fumbling about. So he let his hands drop and grabbed Jonathan’s ass hard, making the other gasp in surprise. Still, there was no sign of being denied, so he grew bolder. When his own ass had been groped and teased, he had liked it in the extreme. He was still wondering, however, if this wasn’t actually hotter. Jonathan’s butt was firm and filled his hands so nicely.

“Your ass is perfect for getting dick,” he said when they stopped, breathing hard.

“Not ready yet,” Jonathan whispered.

Yet. Maddox grinned. So quickly did he change his mind; Maddox needed only to give him the tiniest of shoves, and Jonathan would yield right away. He decided that it was time to play his ace. After his little conversation with Kane, he had made up his mind. “Ready to get your dick sucked, then?”

Jonathan let out a small confused moan. “Don’t be a tease, Kingsley. It’s cruel.”

Maddox grabbed his hand and pulled him along. “Come on. I’ll have you lean against the car while I’m working that nice cock of yours.”

Jonathan hurried after him. “Why?”

Maddox smirked, although the other couldn’t see him. “Because I’m about to blow your mind and I don’t want you toppling over and dirtying your pretty clothes.”

“Good point,” Jonathan replied, but his voice was deep and ragged.

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He had to be dreaming. His back was against the car – a good idea after all – he had no trouble standing only because Maddox’s hands were firmly grasping his hips and holding him in place.

“At any point you don’t like this, we can stop, you know?” he whispered.

He would probably die a little if Maddox did that, but the least he could do was to remain courteous.

Maddox snorted and opened his fly. Jonathan’s breath hitched as his hard-on was released.

“Look at how fast it grows,” Maddox joked as he moved one hand along Jonathan’s impossibly hard erection.

The saving grace was that he would probably last very little time. Because of Maddox, he was a horny bastard these days.

“Any pointers before I go in? You know what, forget it. You don’t know anything about it anyhow.” Maddox didn’t allow him one extra second to reply and covered the engorged head with his lips.

Jonathan buried his hands in Maddox’s hair. It felt so soft and nice; and the sensations coursing through his body were so good he could cry.

“If I do something weird and you hate it, just tell me,” Maddox said, pulling back a little.

“You only need to exist where you are right now, and I’m happy,” Jonathan whispered and brought Maddox’s head back.

“Wow, big words.”

Indeed. Jonathan shut him up, more forcefully than he intended, by filling his beautiful mouth. Maddox made a surprised sound but recovered quickly and began moving his tongue around. That was too much already.

“Maddox, please slow down, I beg you,” he whispered.

Maddox raised one hand and gave him a thumbs up to show that he understood. Yet, as his mouth moved slowly along his cock, it was even more arousing. Drew had always been so hurried, so rough on the rare occasions he had jerked him off that Jonathan felt like each time he came it was being pulled out of him.

There was no sign of that in the way Maddox sucked his cock. It didn't matter that he appeared clumsy; at the same time, he was enthusiastic, like he was tasting something delicious for the first time in his life. The small sounds that came out of his throat to accompany the steady movement of his plump lips were driving him crazy with too much want.

Maddox was sucking his cock. The thought of that alone was enough to make him spill, but now he was being treated to the real thing, and all his fantasies faded in comparison.

“Please, move away, I'm coming,” he gasped.

To his surprise and elation, Maddox did nothing of the kind. Instead, he clamped his mouth hard on his cock and brought his lips together in a delicious squeeze. Jonathan cried out as his entire body tensed for what felt like blissful ages and then went limp.

“Wow,” Maddox smacked his lips as he was standing up to lean against the car beside Jonathan, breathing hard.

“I warned you,” Jonathan breathed out.

“So? It wasn't bad or anything. Or haven't you ever tasted it?”

That was a little jab, for sure.

“Yes, of course I have,” he replied.

Maddox leaned toward him and kissed him. “Then you won't mind if I do this.”

He was spent, coming down from the biggest high in his life, and it had lasted such a short amount of time that he wondered whether he hadn't imagined it. No, Maddox's scent was all around him, and their lips and tongues were doing a happy dance, so it was all real.

Jonathan placed his hands on Maddox's shoulders and pushed him slightly away; one, because he needed air, and two, because he would never live it down if he were to be perceived as a selfish lover. "It's my turn," he announced.

Maddox blinked. "Um, I thought you hated it or something."

"That something has changed," Jonathan said in a serious voice.

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He still tasted Jonathan on his lips and tongue, and that alone was enough to make him happy. One part of his brain still insisted that he should refuse Jonathan, while the other was pushing him to whip his cock out already and get that beautiful mouth to give it a kiss and more. Now that had been something, and Maddox licked his lips. Stuffing his mouth with Jonathan's amazing cock had been out of this world, in the best of ways. Definitely not the threshold he had expected when people talked about same-sex stuff. It all had come so naturally to him that he wouldn't mind trying it again later, at least once more, to see if it felt just as amazing.

Any time he needed to decide whether he was ready to be on the receiving end was taken from him as Jonathan pushed him, quite forcefully, so his back was against the car. This was a part of the guy that never failed to amaze Maddox, and all in a good way. Earlier, he had felt an intensified rush of horniness – no idea how that was even possible with everything they did together – when Jonathan had pulled his head forward to have him suck him. That movement, the way the elegant hand had pressed against the back of his neck, and how that tasty cock had passed through his lips, without letting him adjust, had poured new fire in his veins.

So, yeah, he was as hard as fuck, and Jonathan, who was already crouching at his feet, appeared to be struggling some to bring it out, that stretched his jeans were.

His hands were batted away when he tried to help so he let them rest by his sides while looking down. To imagine that he had that handsome guy there, ready to give him a blowjob. In all honesty, Maddox was curious; he doubted he had performed some deluxe blowjob earlier since he was a novice, but he expected Jonathan to be just as inexperienced, so together they struck a balance.

"Holy shit," he whispered, his thoughts screeching to a halt as Jonathan dragged his tongue slowly along his shaft.

There wasn't any artifice in the way Jonathan moved his tongue lazily around the head, darting beneath it just enough to make more blood rush from Maddox's brain to his crotch. Yet, still, it seemed like he knew what he was doing.

Maybe he had just fantasized a lot about sucking Maddox's cock. Well, that was a nice thought. The limber tongue moved gradually lower while Jonathan swallowed him little by little.

“Wow,” Maddox mumbled. It looked like Jonathan had high hopes and great expectations for his skills because he was truly insisting on getting more and more –

Oh, fuck, there was no doubt about it. He checked with one hand, caressing Jonathan’s lips wrapped firmly around the base of his cock. That was some crazy deepthroat technique, which meant that any hopes he had that Jonathan hadn’t sucked more than half a dick once would have to go down the drain.

Not one for regrets much, he bucked his hips only a smidge. Jonathan snuck one hand under his undershirt and pressed against his lower abdomen. He was holding him in place while deepthroating him. And, man, he was doing a crazy job of giving that blowjob.

Like everything Jonathan did, it had an air of elegance about it. Maybe his mind was too far gone, and his cock was twitching too much in the other’s mouth to consider any of his thoughts as reasonable, but that was what it felt like. He was getting an elegant blowjob if anyone were to ask, not that he would answer any such questions regarding Jonathan.

Yes, he was his secret, and it suited Maddox just fine, but only for this month. After that, the boy would be his, and the rest of the world could go suck it.

Speaking of which, Jonathan continued to regale him with languorous moves along the entire length of his cock, increasing the pressure from time to time. He stopped once in a while, Maddox’s cock stuffed down his throat, and rested there.

Damn, if he couldn’t feel everything. It was so insanely intimate, and only being balls deep in Jonathan’s ass could compete with it. The thought of that made his cock surge with new power. It looked like the other felt it, too, because he began to move his head faster, his lips making that delicious suction last longer.

But, as much as he wanted to enjoy Jonathan’s mouth for a long time, it wouldn’t be tonight. So long had he dreamed of what it would be like, and the real thing was totally blowing his mind. He held Jonathan by the back of the head. “In your mouth? Can I do it?” His own voice was strange to him, deep and a tiny bit unsure.

Jonathan gave the underside of his cock a little flick with his tongue in acquiescence, which counted as a small mercy, given how he could barely stand anyway. He groaned and moved his hips slightly, afraid of getting too rough.

They must have heard him back on campus, that loudly he shouted when he came. Loud and long, like the sensation had no end, and Jonathan kept driving him mad, pushing him deeper, as if that were even possible.

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“How was it?”

Maddox let his head loll and laughed. “False modesty doesn’t become you, Hamilton. It was freaking awesome. Where did you learn to suck cock like this?”

Jonathan looked away, although in that dark, the other could only guess at his embarrassment. “Do you really need to ask?”

“So much for lying about hating it.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Something like that. So, how many guys at your college before got the experience of a lifetime and were sucked off by you?”

The question was asked casually, but it was easy to detect something else underneath. Maddox didn’t keep many things hidden, or so it seemed.

“Just one,” Jonathan admitted.

“One? You’re totally pulling my leg. C’mon, admit it. There was a waiting line, and everyone wanted in.”

Maddox was just teasing him.

“Are you implying I’m easy?” Jonathan asked, hoping he sounded affronted enough, although his lips kept twitching.

“Nah, far from it. Just joking, and I’m actually jealous.”

“Jealous? What for?”

“Not for. I’m jealous of that guy. I mean, if you had been just a guy crazy about sucking cock for sport, I’d have dug that. But one, that means he must have been special. You clearly made the effort to get good at blowjobs for his sake.”

Jonathan remained silent. Was it true? In a way, yes. He had wanted to make Drew happy, blow his mind away. But their so-called relationship had always been out of synch, like two gears that always failed to get into the right rhythm.

“You don’t have to be jealous. He’s nothing but old history.”

Maddox surprised him by linking his fingers with his. “Wanna talk about it?”

“Why spoil a perfect evening?”

Maddox chuckled and pressed his lips against his cheek, releasing with a smacking sound. “You make a perfect point, Mr. Hamilton. May I offer you a ride back?”

Again, the teasing. But Jonathan didn't mind. Maddox making fun of his upbringing and origins was liberating. He was the kind of person not to take it seriously, wherever Jonathan came from.

"I surely hope so. Otherwise, it might take me half the night to get back to campus."

"It's not that far, but it's my pleasure. Thank God you sucked me off."

"Really? Leave divinity out of it," Jonathan said, barely stopping himself from grinning from ear to ear.

"Yeah. It's tough to drive with a hardon. This should hold me until we get back."

"Ah, and that was an allusion to your fast rebound time, right?"

"Totally. Now let's get back before it runs out."

Jonathan couldn't agree more. He needed to reach his room, hide under covers, and grin like crazy while thinking of Maddox and his gorgeous everything.

## *Chapter Fourteen – Okay For Me To Hold Your Hand*

Maddox had been merciful enough to let him off the hook once they were back from their not exactly a date, and throughout Monday they hadn't even bumped into each other. To his surprise, Jonathan had slept through the night like a log, something unusual for him ever since he had left home. Between lectures, studying, and working, he had little time to daydream about his owner for a month, a boy who had the craziest ideas about how to torture him.

As the hour for closing the library drew near, Jonathan couldn't help let his mind wander in unpleasant directions. It wasn't like he expected texts filled with innuendos and inane emojis depicting various vegetables, but all this silence was unnerving. He had barely seen Maddox from afar all day long. It made him feel like everything had happened only in his imagination.

No, it had definitely happened, and probably Maddox had decided that whatever this was, he didn't like it. It wasn't unheard of, after all. Drew had used to be so hot and cold, driving him mad with guessing --

The phone notified him of an incoming message.

*How long until you're done with work?*

Jonathan had to fight the urgency tickling his fingers before managing to type a reply.

*Not long.*

*Come by when you're finished.*

*Why?*

*Seriously? Maddox says.*

*Right. Your game.*

*Shut up. You love bjs just as much as I do. And look what I have for you.*

Jonathan almost dropped the phone when the image of a hard, awesome cock, held at an angle to allow the viewer to bask in all its gorgeousness, was displayed on his screen.

*Are you seriously sending me nudes?*

*Feel free to add it to your spank bank.*

*I don't have a spank bank.*

*Then start one. Name it Maddox. It would truly mean a lot.*

*Have you taken Viagra? How can you be so hard and text at the same time?*

It wasn't rocket science. He was just as aroused and shifting his position in an attempt to ease the tightness in his pants while texting with Maddox didn't help.

*Why take stimulants when I have the real thing?*

*What real thing?*

*You. Fuck, that bj you gave me last night, I'm still thinking about it. Just come already.*

*I can only stay for one hour.*

*Good enough for me. My dick may be an asshole about it, though.*

Jonathan would have kept texting and argued some more, but in all honesty, he felt as if he had just taken his head out of the water after having it forced under to the point of suffocation. He grabbed his things in a rush while heading out.

*I'm on my way.*

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Maddox hurried downstairs to stalk the door even though it would take Jonathan a bit to get there from the library. He winced as his dick was crushed against his jeans in a painful way. It had been well-plotted to send Jonathan that pic so that he could light a fire under his ass, but now he had some trouble making it go back down. A new surge of excitement was making it impossible to stay still, and he wished he had a magic wand so he could make his friends in the living room disappear while he waited for Jonathan.

“Look at him, what a puppy,” Dex commented with a smirk. “Rushing to the door, waiting for his master to get home.”

“Shut up. I'm just checking the plants,” Maddox mumbled. He threw a dubious look at the two pots by the door. He never cared for stuff like that, but the sight of the obviously ill plants was depressing. “Why the hell do they look like that?”

Kane shrugged. “Rusty had this idea that he could get them to like beer.”

“I don't think it's working. Where is the resident kinkster anyway?”

“Hooking up, most probably, like he does most of these days,” Kane offered promptly. “Are you waiting for Jonathan?”

The smile on his friend's face told him that, just like Dex, Kane had figured out why he was hugging the door at that hour. “Yeah,” he said, trying to keep his tone neutral.

“Aw, are mom and dad embarrassing you, pumpkin?” Dex teased him. “When are you going to introduce him properly to us, as your boyfriend?”

“Hush, he doesn’t want people to know,” Maddox said quickly and waved.

Kane and Dex exchanged a look he didn’t like.

“Why?” Kane asked.

That wasn’t the time to explain. “Give me a month, and I’ll introduce him to you as more than that.”

“More than a boyfriend?” Dex asked, the incredulity in his voice too damned high. “This is getting more serious than I thought.”

Kane opened his palm. “Pay up, loser.”

Dex sighed and hit Kane’s open palm with a five after digging it out of his pocket.

“Are you guys seriously betting on my love life? Man, you two should go out more.”

“Love life,” Kane said with a fond sigh. “Are you hearing him, mother?”

“Why am I the mother?” Dex protested.

Maddox pressed his ear against the door. “Hush, you two. And seriously, go out and date or something. Stop spying on me,” he whispered.

“You know you can just look out the window,” Kane suggested. “Ah, here comes Prince Charming. Let’s go study in the kitchen, Dex, or these two lovebirds will be too shy to make their nest with us watching.”

It made sense that those two were indoors tonight. They were working on a project together, and unlike Rusty, who only cared about barely graduating, and Maddox, who had a knack for learning fast, Dex and Kane were dead serious about their grades and dedicated a lot of time to them.

“Appreciate it, guys,” he said to their retreating backs.

“Don’t mention it,” Dex said and waved good-naturedly.

His friends didn’t mind teasing him and joking around, but they could be sensitive when needed. It could be because of Kane’s positive influence since he was more attuned, apparently, to all that stuff. Nothing rubbed off on Rusty, though. But when did anything? Rusty was stubborn and cared about being his own person above all. And they all loved him for who he was.

No time to ponder over his friends. He knew everything about them already. At the door was someone who Maddox very much wanted to know everything about, as well.

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Jonathan was surprised when the door opened in front of him even before he had a chance to knock. Maddox leaned against it, gave him a lewd once-over, and moved away languidly to make room for him to walk inside. “You took your sweet time.”

“Seriously? I practically ran here,” Jonathan protested.

Maddox pushed the door shut and dragged him close by the front of his sweater. “Hmm, you are a bit sweaty.” He purred, low and distractingly, in his ear. “I like it when you’re needy.”

“Am I nothing but a booty call to you? Because it feels like it.”

Not that he really minded it. Just the sight of Maddox in nothing but a pair of worn jeans, a white tee, and barefoot, gave him a thrill and made his skin turn all into goosebumps. There shouldn’t have been anything sexual about his attire, but maybe Jonathan was already imagining him without his clothes, and his dirty imagination was to blame. “Where are your friends?” he asked, realizing that he was neglecting an important detail.

“Dex and Kane are busy studying, and Rusty is somewhere, fucking his own and some girl’s brains out,” Maddox said hurriedly. He grabbed his hand and pulled him up the stairs.

“He’s apparently the newly crowned king of hookups,” Jonathan mentioned, as he remembered the latest gossip reported to him by Ray despite his protests of not wanting to hear anything published by Xpress. “Doesn’t it irk you?”

“Irk me? Why?”

It was hard to keep up with Maddox as they rocketed to the first floor, ending up in his room.

Jonathan had to fight the now familiar hammering of his heart once they were truly alone and away from potentially prying eyes. The sense of urgency in Maddox’s movements made his entire body pulse with want.

“You used to be the king, right?”

Maddox shrugged and pressed him against the door. “I don’t give a damn. Between me and Rusty, I got the better deal.”

Jonathan snorted, searching hard for something that would stop his belly from doing somersaults while Maddox snuck one strong thigh between his legs, aiming for his erection without delay.

“What’s that? A bona fide cocksucker?”

If there were bitterness in how he said that, Maddox most probably chose to ignore it. “I love it when you talk dirty. I hope you don’t kiss your mother with that mouth.”

*Not anymore.*

“No,” he said dryly.

Maddox grinned against his lips. “Good. Get busy and kiss me.”

He managed a small breath before Maddox covered his mouth with his completely. Nothing was wrong with kissing a straight boy, right? They were playing safe, although it would have been a hard thing to tell what they were playing for anyway.

Speaking of hard, Maddox had no qualms about torturing his erection with his thigh, not that he dared to complain. To do so would have meant letting go of that sweet mouth that kept on making his entire body shudder in delight. Maddox was an expert kisser; there was nothing his lips didn’t know how to do. His tongue was marvelous, the way it moved, caressing the inside of Jonathan’s mouth, not leaving a single fraction of an inch unexplored.

There was a real danger that he would come from kissing only. Not really only, since there was also that strong thigh rubbing against his cock over and over, making it hard to breathe normally.

Maddox didn’t seem keen about letting him go, and now he was sneaking one hand under Jonathan’s shirt, first caressing his belly and then aiming higher. It was insane how good those calloused fingertips felt on his skin. And Maddox was a bit rough when pulling at his left nipple like he wanted it to become detached so he could run away with it. Again, Jonathan couldn’t complain because it felt way too good to make any real protests.

Therefore, he felt rather bereft when Maddox finally pulled away. His disappointment was short-lived, however, as the show displaying before his eyes changed the focus of his desire. Maddox pulled his t-shirt over his head, allowing Jonathan to indulge in an unimpeded view of that perfect torso. Next came the jeans, and it looked like Maddox hadn’t bothered with underwear.

Seeing it on the screen on his phone was one thing. In real life, it was glorious. Jonathan wanted nothing more than to drop to his knees and pay his proper respects. His mouth watered at the sight of that perfect salute.

“What are you waiting for? Undress already,” Maddox teased him. “Chop-chop, the clock is ticking.”

Jonathan didn’t waste any time. His fingers trembled as he struggled with the buttons of his shirt and gasped when Maddox reached for him and began helping him by opening his fly and getting busy with his dress pants.

“You should wear things that are easier to take off,” Maddox said as he bared Jonathan’s ass by pulling down both his pants and underwear at the same time.

“I’ll keep that suggestion in mind when dressing in the future. Wait, I need to take off my shoes.”

Maddox grinned and pushed him against the bed, making him do the penguin walk backward, due to his pants and underwear being now wrapped around his ankles. He tried to protest while Maddox took off his shoes, but it all happened too fast, and soon they were nothing but two naked bodies getting busy and entangled on the bed.

Maddox laughed and rubbed his nipples against his chest. “I had no idea this felt so good. Do you like how my tits feel against you?”

Jonathan couldn’t say no to that. So he grabbed Maddox’s nipples with both hands and squeezed them. That earned him an instant sigh of pleasure from the other. “I want to suck your cock,” he confessed.

“Straight to the point. Are you sure you’re gay?” Maddox teased him.

“You sent that picture,” Jonathan accused. “Forgive me for assuming that all that conversation around oral sex was actually about oral sex.”

“Then do some oral to my sex already,” Maddox replied and laughed.

Jonathan pressed him to his back, and Maddox let him. He placed his hands under his head and gave Jonathan a satisfied grin. He appeared to be the top dog, or rather a tom cat, the way he stretched out like that, making his abdomen taut. Yet, Jonathan couldn’t help the feeling of empowerment washing over him as he took the gorgeous cock waiting for him between his lips. Maddox lay there, prey to his whims, albeit that he would protest if he knew the least of what Jonathan was thinking.

He would never tire of something like this. As insane as everything seemed, Jonathan was tumbling down the rabbithole, unable to stop himself. Maddox’s hot cock in his mouth grounded him in ways he never thought possible. Any thoughts of Drew, any comparison he couldn’t help running through his head when fully conscious, unlike now in this dreamworld, disappeared. The small gasps escaping that gorgeous mouth, the hand in his hair, pulling and urging him to go deeper, do more, were all that mattered.

It was not a problem for him to deepthroat. From the first time he had understood the mechanics, he had been quite adept at it, much to Drew’s satisfaction. But he had never gotten the favor in return, and he wasn’t expecting it from Maddox, either.

A straight guy's cock. That had to be the name of his weakness, because he felt willing to do anything for it. He moved slowly, making sure to apply just the right pressure so that Maddox's best friend would grow to full size.

"Damn, I think I just grew an inch or so," Maddox commented, as he grabbed his cock and pulled it away from Jonathan's mouth to take a good look at it.

Rightfully so, Jonathan felt deprived by what should have belonged to him for the remainder of that hour. Therefore, quite unceremoniously, he seized Maddox's cock and stuffed it back into his mouth so that he could get high on it. The head was pulsing, sending slight shivers of pleasure down his spine. The mere thought of pleasuring the other was enough to make him go nuts, too.

"Fuck, you look so good," Maddox murmured. "I love getting head, but hell, you're in a league of your own. I don't know how you can breathe while doing that."

Jonathan didn't stop to offer him any explanations. Instead, he increased his rhythm, enjoying how Maddox whispered words of praise, some dirty, some sweet.

"No," came a tiny plea. "I don't want to come just yet."

Jonathan stopped with unhidden reluctance. Maddox laughed and pushed him on his back.

"Let's do sixty-nine."

"I don't mind being the only one--" Jonathan began.

"I do," Maddox said shortly.

They lay on one side, and Jonathan gasped when warm naughty lips wrapped around the head of his cock.

"Just for the record, no laughing at me or anything. I'm practically biting the bullet here," Maddox warned.

"Hopefully, there'll be no biting," Jonathan replied in turn. "And you already sucked me off once, right? No need to be coy."

He was anything but. Maddox had a straightforward manner of doing everything that knocked him off his feet completely.

"Yeah, but that time I thought you had no idea about how to suck cock."

"Really? What gave you that idea?" It was hard to enunciate full sentences while Maddox was licking his cock from all sides with genuine enthusiasm.

“You said you didn’t like it, so I thought you must have tried it once, and that guy had a weird cock or something.”

“You imagine the strangest things about me.”

“Only because you’re not letting anything out.”

It was true. Jonathan wanted to share nothing about his previous life. Even Ray had scolded him about it, affectionately and as a friend. That part of him, that version, had to remain buried. What was the point of digging through all of the hurtful past?

Especially when the present in front of his eyes was so alluring. Without saying a word, he proceeded to suck Maddox’s cock in to the hilt.

“Not fair,” Maddox moaned. “I want to do that, too.”

“Don’t worry,” Jonathan replied after releasing the delicious thing in his mouth with a pop.

“You’re doing so much already.”

“Says you,” Maddox protested and went back to the job at hand with a vengeance.

Jonathan could hardly keep his wits about himself as a daring tongue was challenging him in all possible ways. Maddox could only swallow half of his cock, but he did wonders with that half. Maddening, yes, that was the correct word to describe it.

“I want to come on your face,” Maddox announced as his breathing became harsh.

They were busy sucking each other off like it was the last thing they had to do while still on the face of the planet, and that urgency was taking its toll on them fast.

“I’d rather swallow,” Jonathan whispered.

He had his reasons for shying away from that; Drew had liked to give him facials a lot, but with him, it was more about asserting his position than pleasure, Jonathan had come to suspect. Not that he thought the same of Maddox, but he didn’t want any similarities or basis for comparison.

“You like my cum that much?” Maddox asked, his voice low and ragged. “Oh, fuck, Jonathan, say you do.”

“I do, I like your cum,” he said back and swallowed the juicy cock to the hilt again, holding it there and helping it with small undulations of his mouth and throat.

“Fuck, then... here it comes,” Maddox let out with a low groan.

The silence that followed after unnerved Jonathan. Maddox lay on his back, a hazy look on his face, his eyes on the ceiling. He moved cautiously, his own neglected cock bouncing left and right.

“Hey, did I break you?” he teased, but his voice was trembling a smidge.

Maddox set his eyes on him like he was seeing him for the first time. “Do you think if we had met in high school, I would’ve become gay for you then?”

Jonathan rolled his eyes and pushed Maddox in the ribs playfully. “The former king of hookups must have gotten plenty of head,” he said wryly. “Don’t tell me I’m making that much of an impression on you.”

“You do,” Maddox said simply. “And I’ll suck you off, but give me a minute to put my brain back together.”

Jonathan lay by Maddox’s side and looked at the ceiling, too. There was nothing interesting to see there, but it was safer than eyeing his unusual bed partner and realizing that he was so beautiful it hurt.

Maddox placed his hand over his, startling him. “Easy,” he whispered teasing followed. “You’ve just sucked my balls dry. I’d say it’s okay for me to hold your hand.”

In all honesty, Jonathan wasn’t used to such proofs of... Of what? Affection? He needed to stop deluding himself, but he allowed Maddox to caress his hand slowly. His own remained flat on the bed, unmoving.

He lay still as Maddox moved along his body and settled into a comfortable position to stroke his cock and tease it gently with his lips and tongue. The taste of cum lingered in his mouth, and it was unique to this guy. Not that he had had others, except Drew’s of course, but Maddox’s was different. He preferred it, he decided, and closed his eyes.

Maddox’s mouth was warm and soft on him, unlike his hand that had a vicelike grip on the base of his cock. Knowing that he couldn’t offer the same depththroat technique in turn, Maddox had clearly opted for roughing his cock up with one hand.

Jonathan felt his toes curling against the bed and bit his bottom lip hard. Maddox didn’t stop for a moment, lapping at the head of his cock like it was an ice cream cone, making it easy to climb to the highest peak, but difficult to get down.

Maddox pulled himself up and aligned his body beside Jonathan’s to reach and kiss his mouth. It was just so easy to open up and let him do that. Their tastes mingled, and it was intoxicating. Jonathan closed his eyes and squeezed them to stop the rush of feelings from reaching his head and making a mess out of it.

What was he thinking? He was already messed up.

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By Jonathan's expression, he wasn't doing a half-assed job. Still, Maddox thought with envy, Jonathan made it seem so simple. Fucking-A sword swallower. Not everyone could do that, and it was a simple fact.

He enjoyed the feeling of their bodies glued together for a while. "Hey, what's your favorite color?" he asked.

Jonathan blinked and looked at him in confusion. "Grey," he replied, and his breath came as a small huff, like he was annoyed.

No, he wasn't. It was something else completely, as he had come to understand. Maddox snickered. "Really?"

There were traces of a small blush washing over Jonathan's cheeks. Damn, but it would be so delicious to break through all his walls.

"Yeah. And before you start teasing me, yes, it's because of your gorgeous eyes."

Maddox sighed, unafraid of showing his satisfaction at that. "Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

Jonathan stared at him. "Why are you asking? I thought I was here to suck cock, not give an interview."

Maddox shrugged. "I'm the youngest of seven brothers and sisters. Two older brothers, four older sisters," he said with pride.

"The youngest? No wonder you're so spoiled," Jonathan commented. "I bet your siblings are all crazy about you."

"You could say that." Totally. His sisters, especially, had always spoiled him. And his brothers had taught him everything that was worthy of being learned. "Come on, give me something about yourself. I'm like an open book if you care to read me."

Jonathan was slowly going back into his shell, and Maddox had no intention of letting him. He wrapped his leg around the slender thigh, making sure to keep him from bolting.

"We're hooking up, Maddox. Are you secretly working for Sunny Hill Xpress? Apparently, they're also interested in my whereabouts and history, more so than they should be."

Maddox laughed. "Yeah. It's my get rich scheme. I find out everything about you, I sell your secrets, and I become a millionaire."

“I’m not worth that much.”

“To me, you are.”

Well, it wasn’t his intention to sound corny, but Jonathan didn’t seem to take the hint. His eyes were darting sideways, and he was beginning to move away.

“The hour’s not up,” Maddox said tersely.

Jonathan caressed his cheek, surprising him with how gentle he was. “Let me kiss you again. You’re so beautiful.”

Phew, he wasn’t the only one saying corny stuff. That, Maddox could do. He found himself a comfortable position on top of Jonathan’s body and brought their lips together. But damn if that didn’t make him want to do more. He snuck his hands around, reaching for that awesome ass so that he could hold on to something, while Jonathan was making him float above the ground with his crazy kisses.

To make things easier, Jonathan bent one leg at the knee. Maddox grunted as his cock hardened again against the other’s taut abdomen. “Fuck, what will it take to let me fuck you?” he whispered in frustration while his fingers were where another part of his body wanted to be.

Jonathan was so hot there. Maddox could feel it with the tip of his fingers. That would be so different from everything he had ever had so far. The hole wasn’t yielding, but it promised crazy delights. An image of his cock stretching it wide, while Jonathan’s body devoured him, flashed through his brain. He groaned and squeezed Jonathan’s buttock hard, earning a small sound of protest from the other.

A sound that also sounded pretty much like the dude was aroused, too.

“I don’t know, Maddox,” the answer finally came.

“Figure it out, or I will. I need to fuck you, get it?”

To his dismay, Jonathan began laughing.

“I’m serious,” he protested.

“You’re cute when you’re all worked up like this,” Jonathan teased him.

Maddox growled playfully. “Of course I’m worked up. Look at my cock. Look what you’re doing to it.”

Jonathan made a show of pushing him away and examining the state of his cock. He stroked it slowly and hummed under his breath. “We can observe signs of swelling which means that the organ must be suffering quite a lot... There is only one way to make the pain go away.”

Maddox grabbed his cock from Jonathan's hand just as it was about to get swallowed again. Jonathan was good at devouring him, along with his sanity. "I'm still giving you that facial."

He expected another protest, but only a small dark shadow crossed over the beautiful amber eyes, and it was soon gone.

Maddox wasn't the kind to impose himself on others, although girls usually goaded him into being more domineering with them. In a way, he had the practice, so he placed his cock against Jonathan's cheek and rubbed it around. "I want my cum here," he said, "and here," he added as he moved his cock around the other's face. "Fuck, I want it everywhere."

"What will your friends think, seeing me walk by with my face covered in your cum like that?" Jonathan asked.

"I'll wipe it off first."

Maddox felt his cock twitching. Not that he would let anyone, not even his buddies, see Jonathan like that, but the idea of parading him all marked with cum so that the world knew who the guy belonged to made him all hot and bothered. He held Jonathan's head with one hand and used the other to stroke his cock fast. At this point, he needed no other incentive. It took little for his cum to flow freely and paint Jonathan's handsome face.

The amber eyes were closed, smart choice, and Maddox took advantage of it to spread his cum all over Jonathan's cheeks and lips. A small exhalation, and a rosy tongue darted out to lick some. Maddox teased it by rubbing the head a bit against it. Everything Jonathan did was sex. He could blink, and it would just make Maddox's cock spring up like a jack-in-the-box toy.

He used his fingers to rub the cum gently into Jonathan's skin. The most amazing thing was how the other let him do that to him. It was intimate on a whole different level, as he got to know Jonathan not only through skin on skin contact, but in many other ways. "Come here," he whispered and pulled him into a tight hug and kiss.

They moved their lips slowly, enjoying this unhurried time. Maddox was pretty damned sure that he would get it up again soon if they kept going like that, but he didn't want to stop, not even to get his cock sucked again by that awesome mouth and lips, not to talk, or anything else. Jonathan rubbed his erection helplessly against Maddox's thigh, and satisfaction flooded all his senses. This dude was as crazy about him as he was. Nice deal, indeed.

He allowed Jonathan to hump his leg while making sure to kiss him fully. At the same time, his hands moved to tease, one behind, searching for that delicious crack and the small treasure within it, and one aiming for the nipples which appeared to be quite sensitive.

Maddox adjusted his position slightly so that he could go deeper; his fingers managed to go a little through the tight hole, and a shiver gripped him at the thought of putting his tongue there,

then his cock. Fucking Jonathan would be amazing. He had no doubt about it, and he would make sure that it happened before the month was up. Jonathan's cherry belonged to him, not some weirdo like Connor. Only the thought of Jonathan liking the guy annoyed him to no end.

Vengefully, he pushed his finger in more, earning a surprised gasp from the other. Yes, he would go there, he would put the boy on all fours and fuck him and fill his ass with cum. Then, he'd turn him face up and fuck him again while locking eyes with him and watching him squirm and come from ass pounding alone.

Jonathan seemed to sense something was about to happen to him, so he grabbed his cock and began to stroke it. It had to be another race of sorts, so Maddox began moving his finger around. The hard cock against his thigh was leaving moist traces everywhere it touched.

He removed his hand only so that he could dip his fingers in his mouth. The downside of that was that he needed to break the kiss. Jonathan watched him darkly, his breath coming in short huffs as he coated his fingers. They kissed again, and Maddox pushed two fingers inside the tight hole this time, making Jonathan tremble head to toe.

Fuck, they needed the practice because that hole was tight as fuck. Maybe he needed to jerk off a lot so that he didn't come too fast once he got to the point of putting it in. Jonathan jerked his hips, rubbing his cock more desperately against his thigh. Maddox experienced a deep satisfaction as the scorching hot hole began swallowing his fingers.

They'd see where they went from there, but it was clear Jonathan wanted something in that gorgeous ass of his. Maddox moved his fingers faster, kissed deeper, and enjoyed the hand punishing his cock with urgent moves.

Jonathan groaned as Maddox pushed inside more, and his hip movement stopped while a small keening sound left his lips. During what followed, he must have lost all sense of rhythm because he made his cock spray all over.

"Oh, damn," he whispered when they both lay on their backs again.

"You can say that again," Jonathan confirmed. "I came all over your thigh."

"That's all right."

"I wasn't apologizing. After all, you came on my face."

"That's hardly payback. I'm so totally going to fuck you," Maddox said.

Jonathan remained silent.

"What?" Maddox insisted. "I'll convince you."

"I don't doubt that."

There was something akin to resignation in how Jonathan said that.

“You know, it’s not the end of the world if you’re crushing on me,” Maddox said.

“Or maybe it is.”

He wasn’t denying it, but he made it sound like a bad thing. Maddox didn’t like that one bit. Jonathan was quick to jump in bed with him for sure, but winning over his heart was a different matter. It was new to him, this courtship or whatever; all the times before, he only had to smile and be cute. Girls found him easy to seduce, as some had let him know.

Only now Jonathan wanted to be the one to be seduced, and Maddox smiled at the realization. Yeah, he’d use his all and everything to convince this guy that –

That what? They were just hooking up, although... well, the sex so far was pretty amazing, and the promise of what followed was even more than that. And Maddox wanted it so badly that it was his only purpose in life right now.

“I should go,” Jonathan said quietly and made a move to get up.

Maddox reached for him. “Stay here. Spend the night.”

“What?” Jonathan turned toward him.

“I have extra toothbrushes and everything.”

“That’s not the point,” Jonathan said, a bit harshly.

“All right, all right, don’t bite my head off,” Maddox backpedaled, hoping that he didn’t sound incredibly defensive. That refusal kind of hurt.

“It’s just that... I still need to study,” Jonathan explained. “If I were to spend all my waking hours with you, I’d surely lose my head.”

At least he was honest. And Maddox didn’t want to press him anyway. His methods were more refined than that. “Got you.”

“All right,” Jonathan murmured. “Then I should --”

“Wait.” Maddox stood and went to the door. He listened for any sounds, and then gestured for Jonathan. “Let’s shower quickly before you go.”

The short hesitation let him know that at least, Jonathan was considering it. “I’ll need a towel or something.”

“It’s just across. Hurry.”

The soft steps following him made him smile. He could make Jonathan do whatever he wanted. Yes, even make him fall in love with him completely.

## *Chapter Fifteen – The Big Question*

“Do you like risky situations?” Jonathan asked as soon as they were safely inside the bathroom. Rushing across the hallway in the buff had given him a rush, and he felt his heart still hammering in his chest.

“Dex and Kane have their bedrooms downstairs. Only Rusty and I are on this floor.”

“Ah, so you just enjoy stressing me out for no reason.”

Maddox offered his dazzling smile. “You know, that time, at the pool, what was that?”

“What was what?” Jonathan asked as he stepped into the shower stall and pretended not to be affected by how Maddox almost glued himself to his back.

“You know. You ran away like I had the plague or something.”

Could he really explain it? Jonathan took one deep breath. “It wasn’t about you.”

“Then what was it about?” Maddox insisted, just as his hands began to rub against his back, washing him gently.

Their roles were reversed. Back then, he had been the one washing Maddox’s back, and it had all started as a joke.

“I was afraid,” he admitted.

“Of my cum?” Maddox asked as his hands moved to his front and began rubbing his chest.

“Of you.”

“Yeah, ‘cause I’m so scary,” Maddox said with a snort and moved his hands lower.

Jonathan pressed his hands against the tiled wall, to steady himself. Maddox moved again and began to soap his ass crack like it was the most natural thing in the world to do. “You’re called Mad Dawg,” he explained.

“Not for the reasons you think,” came the enigmatic reply.

“Really?” He groaned as Maddox took care of his cock and balls, too. The worst or best part was how he was teasing his crack, though, not pushing or anything against his hole, but making it twitch in expectation. “Enlighten me.”

“No way. Stick around for the whole month, and I’ll tell you.”

“I cannot imagine why you’re so eager about this whole thing,” Jonathan said. “Almost even more than me.”

Maddox made him turn so they were facing each other. The water sprayed them, making their hair heavy and wet. “It’s easier to be more eager than you. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you don’t like me much.”

Jonathan pushed the wet hair away from Maddox’s face. He looked into his eyes. “I like you too much, former king of hookups. And that’s not good for me.”

“Why?” The grey eyes scanned his face.

“Isn’t it obvious? You’re straight; I’m gay. We could never work out.”

Maddox’s face stretched into a lazy grin. “Stop getting so serious, sexy lips. We’re only hooking up.”

Jonathan sighed in relief. For a moment there, he had thought he needed to explain himself. But Maddox took things easy, and easy they would remain, for the sake of their sanity. “Good, that’s good. We should work out some arrangement, though.”

“Because you need to study, right,” Maddox replied. “I’ll let you do that during the week.”

“So, no more booty calls?” Jonathan asked, hoping that he didn’t sound as disappointed as he felt.

Another grin convinced him that he had nothing to worry about. “You wish. I’ll still call. And we need to work on the ‘booty’ part in ‘booty call’.”

Jonathan rinsed the suds off his body and then placed his hands on Maddox’s chest. He wished the heat in his cheeks wasn’t obvious, but by the way the other smiled, there was slim chance of that.

“That dude, was he straight?” Maddox asked.

No need to ask who he meant. Jonathan frowned as his hands explored the contours of Maddox’s astonishing muscles. “Yes,” he replied quietly.

“I see.”

No other commentary followed. He could breathe freely.

“So, he ditched you for some girl?”

Ah, he had relaxed too soon. Jonathan shook his head.

“Is he the reason why you changed schools?”

That conversation was getting too close to home. “Turn your back,” he ordered and began soaping Maddox’s body down to the curve of his ass. This time, he didn’t hesitate and enjoyed

the feeling of those perfect mounds filling his hands while he did his best to tease the other as revenge for his earlier sweet torture. Maddox purred, quite audibly, and Jonathan licked his lips as he investigated along the line separating the buttocks and letting his fingers dart in and out, but only a little. They were walking a thin line here, and he should have been in bed by now.

“Was he afraid of commitment, so you’re afraid, too, now?” Maddox insisted.

“Commitment? Why are you asking? No. Once our month of shenanigans reaches its end, I intend to find someone serious.”

He hadn’t intended to say so much, but Maddox was bugging him with all those questions.

They faced each other again. “Is Connor that someone?”

“He’s a candidate,” Jonathan replied tersely.

Maddox grimaced. “No, cross him off the list.”

“I don’t have a list.”

“Good.” That last word had come out belligerently, like suddenly, they had a bone to pick with each other. Sometimes, Jonathan wasn’t sure Maddox was the open book he claimed he was. There was no reason for possessiveness between them. Yes, their month together involved exclusivity, but it stretched no longer than that.

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Hmm, hmm, Maddox’s mind was going in circles, ever since he had let Jonathan go back to his room. Pieces of the puzzle were coming together, but they didn’t tell the whole story yet. First of all, Jonathan had had a lover. The word would have made his friends snort and laugh, but it suited the guy. Jonathan Hamilton didn’t have boyfriends; he had lovers because everything he did felt like lovemaking.

Second of all, and the most irritating thing, he had been in love, seriously, deeply in love with that asshole. Maddox didn’t know a lot about that, but hell, everything was serious when it came to Jonathan. He was the type of dude that had perfected his blowjobs for his lover’s sake. That took dedication.

Third of all, and this was the silver lining, the asshole had ditched Jonathan. Not that he enjoyed seeing those beautiful amber eyes flicker with hurt, but it was only because of what had happened before that they had a chance to know each other now.

Maddox rolled onto his belly and sighed. By the end of their month together, Jonathan would forget that asshole ever existed in his life. Thank goodness the asshole hadn’t fucked him; it was Maddox’s solemn duty to make that so memorable for Jonathan that he’d never let go.

He was about to drift into a world of pleasant dreams when there was a short rap on the door. He didn't have a chance to invite the person in, because Rusty stuck his head in, scouting the room in one sweep.

"Hey, bud, what's up?" Maddox asked.

"I heard you had your boyfriend over. Did you score?"

Maddox grabbed a pillow and threw it at Rusty who caught it deftly and then marched toward the bed with mischief in his eyes. They were soon engaged in a battle with the pillow in the middle. It ended quickly when they both ended up on the floor.

"I give up," Maddox breathed out.

They lay on their backs, catching their breath. "I scored," Rusty said matter-of-factly.

"You wouldn't be the king of hookups otherwise," Maddox replied in kind.

"I thought you didn't read Xpress."

"Jonathan told me."

"Why?" There was puzzlement in the way Rusty asked the question.

"He was afraid that I might have regrets about being dethroned."

"Tell your boyfriend that's bullshit. I've always been the king."

Maddox laughed. "Sure, buddy, anything you say."

Rusty turned on one side, propping his head on his hand, arm bent at the elbow. "Did you score?" he insisted. "You look like you scored."

Maddox turned his head to look into his friend's eyes. "It was freaking amazing. But I didn't actually get to ass fucking if that's what you're so curious about."

Rusty groaned. "When are you going to fuck this dude? He's leading you by the dick."

"You know, Rusty, some people like to take it easy. We've barely met."

"Did he suck your dick? Give me at least that, or I won't be able to call you my bro anymore."

"Yeah, he did. And I sucked him off, too," Maddox offered.

Rusty's eyes grew wide. "For real? What does it taste like?"

"Fuck off. I told you too much already."

“No way, I need to know.”

“Then go suck a dick and stop pestering me.”

“Are you going to be all lovey-dovey with him now that you two sucked each other’s dicks?”

Maddox sighed. “We’re kind of secret.”

“What do you mean? What’s there to hide?”

Now this was a part of this conversation that Maddox didn’t like very much. “He knows I used to be the king of hookups.”

“No way you were,” Rusty said. “Tell him that. Tell him who the true king is and always was.”

“All right, all right. I bow before the king. Is that enough?”

Rusty nodded with a huff. “What’s his problem?”

“Dunno,” Maddox lied. He had his suspicions about the Asshole (yes, since he didn’t have a name, he deserved a capital letter for that moniker), but he wanted to keep them to himself for now. “But my reputation of fuck ‘em and leave ‘em clearly doesn’t help my case.”

“Do you want me to talk to him? I can tell him you’re the real deal.”

“No, what the hell? I’m doing fine.”

“No need to bite my head off, ‘kay? You’re just wussing around with this dude, is all.”

“I’m not wussing around,” Maddox protested. “It’s just that I don’t want to scare him off.”

Rusty pushed against his shoulder hard. “He’s not a girl, bro. Stop handling him like he’s gonna break or something.”

“Ah, screw you. I’m not going to take advice on this from you.”

“Really? Who are you gonna listen to? Kane? He’s practically half woman ever since he got hitched with Louise. Whatever he knows won’t help you with a dude. And Dex doesn’t love you the way I do,” Rusty joked.

“Yeah, but Dex has two dads, and if I ever need advice, I can ask him to have them help me.”

Rusty scrunched up his nose. “Dex’s dads used to date, when? Like a century ago?”

“If I let them know you said that --” Rusty jumped on him for another session of roughhousing. There was no way to win. “All right, all right, I won’t ask them anything,” he promised.

Finally, Rusty declared himself satisfied and let him go.

“What’s with you?” Maddox asked, wanting to steer the conversation away from Jonathan and learn what Rusty was getting up to these days. “I hear there’s not one girl left on campus who hasn’t had your tender loving care.”

Rusty snickered. “You abandoned the cause, so I had to step up my game. Twice the work--”

“—twice the fun,” Maddox completed the sentence. “You could slow down, you know? You’re hooking up almost every day.”

Rusty shrugged. “Not my fault you got slow. You need to score, grandpa.”

“Why the hell do you want me to fuck Jonathan so much?” Maddox asked, with genuine curiosity.

Rusty’s face was like a mask. “To see if you’re really gay or not. And so you can get over this dude.”

Maddox felt slightly annoyed by that last remark. “I don’t want to get over him.”

“Is that why you’re not fucking him?”

“You know what, Rusty? Sometimes, you’re a huge ass pain to talk to.”

Did his buddy have a point? Could it be that once the novelty wore off, he’d end up getting over Jonathan? Over his gorgeous amber eyes, sexy lips, slender waist, round ass, and fucking A cock? Was it possible?

It wasn’t impossible, for sure. How many times before had he gotten all worked up over a girl only to forget about her within a week? Suddenly, Jonathan’s worries with regard to his person seemed very much legit.

“I hate you, Rusty,” he said.

“Really, why?”

“But I love you, too. Because you just freaking opened my eyes. Now, get your ass to your room and sleep, ‘cause it’s past your bedtime.”

“You can’t make me.”

“Well, in that case, you’re welcome to sleep on the floor.”

“No way. I’m sleeping with you on the bed.”

“Dream on. There’s only one guy whose ass I want in my bed, and that’s not you.”

“That hurt,” Rusty joked and got to his feet. “And let me know how it goes with Jonathan. No one leads my bro by the dick.”

Maddox sighed, but decided not to get into another argument with his friend. He needed time to chew on that revelation. What if he forgot about Jonathan once they fucked, and they became strangers again? The thought alone was so unsettling that he worried he might not get any sleep.

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Jonathan tiptoed inside, not wanting to run into Ray and have to offer explanations on where he had been until that hour. There was no way he could lie to his bestie, not in good conscience now that Ray was pretty much aware of his crush on Maddox. It would be useless to invent a story that he needed to work late or something like that; the library always closed at the same time every day.

“Ah, there you are.” Ray startled him by suddenly opening the door of his bedroom.

Through the open door, Jonathan noticed Hannah sitting on Ray’s bed, leafing through a magazine about board games. Truly, those two had plenty of things in common, and Maddox had played quite the matchmaker when he brought them together.

“Yeah, I’m home,” he said in a strained voice and offered an equally strained smile.

“You took a shower,” Ray said and narrowed his eyes.

Jonathan rubbed the back of his head, realizing that his hair was still a bit damp. He had been in such a hurry to leave that he hadn’t made sure to dry off properly.

“You’ve been with him,” Ray concluded and grinned while leaning against the door jamb.

Jonathan gestured helplessly toward Hannah who had stopped reading the magazine and was now leaning forward. “Hi, Jonathan,” she said and waved happily at him. “How is Maddox?”

Jonathan groaned and ran both hands over his eyes. “Guys, can you keep a secret?” There was no point in chiding Ray for telling Hannah.

“He didn’t tell me anything,” Hannah said as if she could read his mind. “It was just too easy to put two and two together after you left that time in such a hurry, ready to have Maddox’s head. Ah, and there was also the way he talked about you.”

Jonathan let his hands drop and now stared openly at Hannah. She was waiting and smiling. He gave up. “All right, what did he say?”

“Well,” she began, obviously pleased with being able to share her knowledge on the topic, “he told me to go see if Ray was into girls, and he pointed him out to me by saying, I kid you not,

‘it’s the dude in the striped t-shirt hanging around that tall, gorgeous guy’. Yeah, that’s what he said.”

Jonathan was at a loss for words. Was Hannah joking? As much as she smiled, she did appear genuine.

“I bet he says that about everyone,” he made a lame attempt to downplay it.

Hannah shook her head. “I’ve known Maddox since freshman year. He’s not the kind of guy to call another guy gorgeous at the drop of a hat. Actually, I’ve never heard him say that ever.”

“Wait, did you and Maddox...” Jonathan swallowed his words. “Not my business, please ignore me,” he added quickly and put his palms up in surrender.

“Oh, gawd, no,” she said and laughed. “He hooked up with my roommate at the beginning of freshman year. I think she was his first ‘victim,’” she explained while hooking her fingers to emphasize the quotation marks, “here, at Sunny Hill. She was pretty heartbroken over him, so I went over and called him on his bullshit.”

Jonathan stared at Hannah again. Ray had moved away from the door to allow them to see each other and appeared to be having a great time just listening to their conversation. “Really? And what happened next? I mean, with your friend, the roommate --”

Hannah waved. “She got over him within a week and hooked up with someone else. We’re not actually friends now. We’re just too different. But somehow, Maddox and I remained friends.”

The revelation was just too much. Could the famous – former – king of hookups be friends with a girl? Hannah was the living proof, and Jonathan had absolutely no reason to doubt her. “Huh, so there’s someone impervious to his charms, after all,” he said mostly to himself.

Hannah laughed. “Maddox is a great guy once you get to know him. And I think he has kind of a special sense when it comes to hooking up. It’s like he knows which girls to choose. They’re, you know, the superficial type.”

Well, that begged an important question then, since Jonathan was pretty sure he wasn’t either a girl or the superficial type. If anything, maybe he did take things a little bit too seriously. What on earth was he doing with someone like Maddox?

Unless, of course, he was falling in love, which was bad.

Was he falling in love? Now that was a big question.

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Maddox hadn’t ever known such suffering. Avoiding Jonathan during school days was fairly easy, per their understanding that they should keep their thing a secret, but the weekend was

coming fast, and then there would be no more postponing possible. He sighed and groaned, letting his head drop down on the desk in front of him. His agitated state hadn't gone unnoticed, so a lot of people stopped by before the lecture to ask him if he was all right.

Mostly, he was, but not quite. Rusty, the beautiful asshole, had given him quite the puzzle to solve. Definitely, most definitely, he didn't want to get over Jonathan. As much as it would be pure torture for his dick, he would settle for just kissing and petting if that would prevent the fate of forgetting him. Only thinking of Jonathan's kisses was enough to make him want to just walk over to him, in his place in the last row, grab him and –

Ah, the pain. Maddox had always done what he wanted, and in the off-chance a girl didn't like him, he fretted for a little while and then he got over it. That was his usual modus operandi, but, right now, everything was new and pretty weird.

He looked over his shoulder, at Jonathan. The other appeared a bit troubled as well and kept his head down, checking his notes before the prof walked in. But Maddox could tell that Jonathan wasn't reading anything; his head didn't move at all, and he appeared so distant from the world around him like he really needed a big hug that very moment.

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After a glorious start to the week, Maddox hadn't called him at all, and Jonathan had debated numerous times over calling him or sending him a message instead. Still, his pride hadn't let him. At first, he had thought that Maddox was simply busy with his studies like everyone else, but throughout the week, another truth had become apparent.

Maddox was avoiding him. Whenever they saw each other by accident on campus, they just waved an acknowledgement, and this time, it had been Maddox who suddenly changed his direction and walked away from any chance that they might be in close proximity.

The familiar unease was back in full force. But it wasn't like him to dwell on such things. Why would he? One bad experience had been enough. Sure, Maddox talked big about the attraction between them, but it was one thing to be horny and have someone available at the right moment, and another to take some time and think things over. They were just hooking up, and actually, even that they hadn't done for days now.

He would address the problem head on. If he was free to pursue a boyfriend, he wanted to know for sure. Jonathan had no time for games, and if Maddox thought himself interesting for doing so, he would have some thinking to do.

No, he would not be made a fool of once more. Drew had been enough, and that had led to other bad things that he didn't want to think about. Coming here was his chance to tailor himself a proper life, one free of lies and misery, as he had promised himself.

It was freeing to remind himself of the promise he had made at the start of the year. So Maddox had messed up his plans for a little while, but that meant nothing.

He raised his eyes and saw Maddox turned in his seat, watching him. Heat rushed to his cheeks; why was he staring like that? Even if they were at a fair distance, that body language was quite obvious.

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Maddox grabbed his things and headed out of the lecture hall. This weekend, he would call Jonathan over and let him know that, for a while, until he figured things out, they would only kiss and touch each other, maybe jerk off together, or--

“Maddox, can I have a word with you?”

He turned on his heels and faced Jonathan. Why did he have to look so yummy from up close, even more than from a distance? The way he licked his lips was particularly distracting. Maddox fought the urge to reach out and brush his thumb over that perfect mouth that he knew could kiss so well.

“Yeah, sure,” he said, trying to sound nonchalant.

“Do you have anything else right now? I’d rather do this somewhere we won’t be interrupted for five minutes.”

Maddox nodded and gestured for him to follow. Jonathan walked behind him, at a fair distance, and just remembering how they needed to pretend they weren’t getting chummy with one another annoyed him. But hell, Jonathan was right; if he were to get over him the next minute after coming inside his ass –

Shoot, what the hell was he thinking? He bit down on his bottom lip so that the pain would distract him from such horny thoughts. As much as he had tried not to think about it, he still very much wanted to get Jonathan on all fours, pound his gorgeous ass and fill him with his cum.

Ah well, those were just horny thoughts, indeed, he tried to convince himself. He walked out of the building, with Jonathan on his tail. A quiet place was what he needed right now, too. He crossed the quad quickly, taking Jonathan behind one of the buildings that were now being renovated, as that was the most likely place students wouldn’t wander by accident.

He stopped and turned to see if Jonathan was still with him. Leaning against the wall, he took another long look at the other. Yeah, Jonathan didn’t look too good, not in the sense that he was any less gorgeous, but he looked a bit worn out. “So, what’s up?” he asked.

Jonathan took one deep breath. “What’s up is that you’re avoiding me, so I thought we should clear the air. Is our deal no longer valid? I’d like to know so that I can --”

Maddox needed to stop him. Can what? Find a boyfriend? No freaking way. “No,” he replied quickly. “It’s totally valid.”

Jonathan gave him a hard look. “Maddox, it’s all right if you no longer want this. I’m sorry, but I’m not one for games.”

“What games?” Maddox protested.

Jonathan sighed. “You definitely act like someone who doesn’t want to have anything to do with me. And it’s totally fine, I assure you. Just be honest, please. It wouldn’t surprise me.”

Like Maddox was just a little case of history repeating; the proverbial lightbulb lit inside his brain. Ah, damn it, he wasn’t like that asshole, no matter what Jonathan had lived through before. “I want to fuck you,” he blurted out.

Jonathan’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Really? Then you’re sending a bunch of strange signals if that’s the case.”

“But I don’t want to fuck you at the same time,” Maddox continued, aware of his aggressive tone but not exactly able to help it.

Jonathan pinched the bridge of his nose. “Well, that can only mean that you’re confused. Again, I’m fine--”

“Well, I’m not fine with it.” Maddox pushed himself away from the wall, groaned, and ran his hands over his face.

He was surprised when a warm hand touched his shoulder. As he opened his eyes, he noticed Jonathan close, too close for him to get his mind together properly. Was there pity in those amber eyes? Like hell he needed that. He suddenly grabbed Jonathan by the front of his shirt, making him gasp.

“Look here, Mr. Fancy Pants, the thing is this. I don’t want to get over you.”

Only staring at that perfect mouth opening and closing without letting one sound out was enough to drive him nuts.

“Maddox, but we’re doing this to get over... whatever it is that is happening between us.”

“I don’t want to,” he said petulantly like a child. He closed his mouth over Jonathan’s sexy lips, shutting him up.

For a moment, he suspected that Jonathan would push him away, but nothing like that happened. Instead, as usual, he was granted access and allowed to kiss and be kissed back by that clever, naughty tongue that could do so much, not only to his tongue, but also to other parts of his body.

He was reluctant to break the kiss. “This weekend, we’re doing it,” he said, his heart in his throat.

So, he didn’t want Jonathan to think that he was a coward, and if it happened that he got over whatever they had, then he was an asshole, and he needed to work on that.

“What?” Jonathan asked, looking as baffled as before.

“Your sexy ass is mine,” Maddox said and pushed one finger against his chest.

“But you said... Look, Maddox, how about talking plainly to me? What do you want? Please, be clear.”

“My dick in your ass. Clear enough for you?”

“No, not really.”

Oh, great, now he was going to be difficult, but Maddox couldn’t blame the guy. After all, he was a hot mess. He took Jonathan’s cheeks in his hands and stared into the beautiful amber eyes. “I’m hot for you. I have no idea what it means, but it’s bugging me like hell. But if you tell me to fuck off, I’ll try to understand. I don’t promise I will. I’ll probably hate you and stop you from having a boyfriend until we graduate. Yeah, that’ll most likely happen.”

Jonathan’s eyes softened. Then, he laughed, a low, sexy chuckle that went straight to Maddox’s crotch. “All right. I don’t mind doing it with you, so let’s just make it happen. Then all your confusion will finally end, and we’ll both be happy to part ways, no hard feelings. What do you say?”

So Jonathan thought they would get over it once they fucked, too. But while Maddox feared that would happen, Jonathan looked like he hoped for that kind of outcome.

“But not at a party or something like that. I don’t want to be one of your many hookups,” Jonathan added.

“What do you have in mind?”

“Your place or mine. When no one else’s around.”

“Mine. And I’ll send my buddies packing. They’ll party all throughout Saturday night. Does that work for you?”

“Yes.”

“Do we meet earlier, for a bite, or something?” Why was he so nervous while asking all those questions?

“No. If you don’t mind, we’ll cook something. You have a kitchen, right?”

“Yeah. But wait, do you expect us to cook? Something edible?”

“I will,” Jonathan replied.

“Ah, okay.” Was the dude planning to give him indigestion just so they didn’t fuck? That would be an evil plan. But no, Jonathan looked as serious as ever. “Can you even cook?”

“I can, actually. And don’t look so surprised. Call me silly or whatever, but let’s make it a bit special, okay?”

“Fine by me,” Maddox replied while trying to rein in the excitement growing inside him at the thought. They would make it special all right. And Jonathan wanted it!

Jonathan nodded. “All right, then it’s settled. I’ll come by your place at, let’s say, eight?”

“Yeah. Can’t wait,” he said, after a short pause.

“Okay. Then. I’ll just go. First,” Jonathan babbled and turned on his heels.

For all his cool appearance, he looked like he had many things to work out, too. Maddox stared after him, wondering why he still couldn’t read Jonathan and when he would finally be able to.

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Oh, gosh, he had been so close to making a fool of himself, talking about making it special like he wanted to guilt Maddox into something. Was he all right in the head? Not that Maddox had anything to say against it, and he appeared to be up for it, but maybe just because he was horny and wanted this whole thing to be over with.

Jonathan pressed one hand over his chest to help slow his racing heart. He would have sex, proper sex for the first time in his life, and he would try his best to keep his wits about him.

And then, he would finally get over Maddox and his pretty grey eyes.

Maybe, if he said that to himself enough times, he would believe it.

## *Chapter Sixteen – To Getting Over It*

“Are you sure you don’t want to come with us? I don’t think you’ve missed a party since freshman year,” Kane pointed out. He was eyeing him in the most suspicious manner, and Maddox tried to keep steady under that searching gaze. But if Kane thought he could successfully fish for any information by playing it cool, he was wrong. Maddox didn’t want to tell his friends that Jonathan was coming over so that they could fuck and get over it.

Therefore, he had invented that he didn’t feel too hot and wasn’t up for partying and that he’d rather stay at home. “Well, if I came with you, I’d only feel out of it and ruin everyone’s mood.”

“Where does it hurt, exactly?” Dex asked.

“My head,” Maddox said and placed a hand over his belly.

Dex and Kane rolled their eyes at the same time. “Is this sudden affliction called Jonathan Hamilton?”

Maddox groaned. “You two should just leave already. Good thing Rusty’s not here. I’d have to explain myself to him, too, and I really don’t feel like it.”

“Why do you want to keep it a secret from us that you have Jonathan coming over?” Kane asked.

“And do you plan on doing it in the kitchen? Because I haven’t seen you clean that room with so much enthusiasm in ages, and by that, I mean never,” Dex chimed in.

“No, but Jonathan wants to cook.”

He wanted so much to bite his tongue the moment the words left his mouth.

“Omigod, you’re such a married couple,” Kane said with a reverent sigh.

“We’re nothing like that,” Maddox protested. “And could you just leave? I don’t want him to find you here. You’re going to ogle him like you’ve never seen a dude like him before.”

Another unnerving exchange between Kane and Dex. “Well, we haven’t, at least not one the same age as us,” Dex said promptly. “If the dude manages to cook something remotely edible, I’d say you should marry him. ‘Cause we all know how helpless you are around the kitchen.”

“Look at the pot calling the kettle black,” Maddox shot back. “You all only survive on takeout and nothing else.”

“I cook,” Kane said, somewhat defensively.

“Yeah, when you want to impress Louise, but we all know that you’re past that stage, and you wouldn’t boil an egg if the chances of your starving were through the roof.”

Kane pursed his lips in displeasure. Apparently, under their roof, cooking had turned into a sore subject. At least, Dex wasn't affected. His dads were both great home cooks, yet nothing of the kind had rubbed off on him, by some miracle.

"I think we should leave lover boy alone. Keeping my fingers crossed that you two don't end up with food poisoning, though," Dex said.

"Jonathan knows how to cook," Maddox replied and crossed his arms. "We'll be fine, but only if you're out of the door in less than five minutes."

"All right, all right," Kane waved, "but how long are you going to keep this a secret? All the girls on campus are starting to think that you found yourself a sweetheart somewhere that's definitely not here."

His friends could be so annoying sometimes. He ran one hand through his hair and groaned. "Well, it's not like it's their business what I do. And Jonathan and I, we don't know if this is, you know, a fluke or something."

Kane's eyebrows shot up. "You talked about it? Like two adults?"

Maddox felt rightfully superior. "Yeah, totally like that. We have the hots for each other, and we're working on it. It's not like we're falling in love or anything." He put on a brave face as he said that.

"See, Kane?" Dex said with a grin. "Pay up."

Kane sighed and placed a ten-dollar bill in his friend's open palm. "There you go, asshole," he said with half affection, half annoyance.

"Did the rate go up?" Maddox asked. "You know what? Never mind. Just go already, and let me know when the stakes are high enough for someone like me to get in the game."

"I don't even know what he means by that," Kane commented as Dex grabbed him by the shoulders and forced him to walk toward the door.

He let out a relieved breath once his friends were finally out of the house. Another cursory look around the place let him know that he could have done better with the cleaning, but there was no more time to dwell on that. However, he needed to have a serious talk with Rusty over feeding the poor potted plants with beer. What they needed right now was an all-expenses paid vacation to a rehab.

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Suddenly, he was very troubled and uncertain about his cooking skills. It was true that he had dedicated himself to the hobby only since he had left home, but seeing how most things he made were edible, it could only mean that he had a knack for it.

Maybe he had gone overboard, he thought as he placed all the ingredients in the thermal bag.

“I don’t want to pry or anything, but are you going on a picnic?” Ray asked from the door to the small kitchen.

“Yes,” Jonathan replied with a small smile. There was nothing wrong with joking around with Ray, seeing how much teasing his bestie slash roommate inflicted on him on a regular basis.

“On Saturday night?”

“Why aren’t you at some party by now?” Jonathan asked.

“I will be. I’ll go pick Hannah up in about ten minutes. But you made me curious with all those preparations. The only reason I’m not jealous that I won’t be able to eat whatever you’re making is because you’re obviously planning a romantic dinner with the one whose name won’t be pronounced in this house.”

“You make it sound like he’s a demon or something,” Jonathan commented with a chuckle. “And since it’s just you and me, you can say his name.”

“Maddox will be so impressed. Gosh, if he hasn’t fallen for you by now, he will, for sure. I mean, no one can resist your cooking. Are you sure you weren’t a royal chef in a past life? We should go see one of those medium types or whatever they’re called.”

“Do you mean scammers who pretend that they can talk to dead people?”

“Yeah, those.”

“No, thanks. I’d rather not throw money out the window.”

“You know, a lot of people are commenting on how you look like you come from old money or something like that.”

“A lot of people or Sunny Hill Xpress?”

Ray cocked his head and then sighed. “You know the answer. And it’s none of my business, but you’re so clear-headed and careful about how you use your money that I feel like an irresponsible high-roller or something compared to you.”

“Don’t worry. I was practically forced into becoming like this. Not that I ever was a big spender or anything like that.”

“You must have spent some real dough on that dinner, though,” Ray said with a twinkle in his eyes.

“You got me, yes. I splurged a little.”

“Hmm, so it must be some special occasion then. Are you going to propose?”

If he were a hopeless romantic, Jonathan had no idea what to call Ray. Right now, his bestie was only half-joking about proposing. He only hoped Hannah was fine with having such an extra guy for a boyfriend.

“No. I must say the thought is as remote from my mind as it can be.”

“But you like him,” Ray said teasingly while swinging his body and clasping his hands together like a swooning heroine.

“I do, but that’s not the point. The chances are that, after tonight, we might not see each other much,” Jonathan gave voice to the thoughts that had been circling around in his mind like a pack of wolves ever since his last conversation with Maddox.

Ray blinked a few times. “I’m not sure I follow. So, you’re making your breakup special by cooking something delicious?”

“It cannot be called a breakup if there’s no relationship to begin with,” Jonathan explained.

“Ah, my head hurts. You know what, JJ? Just go with the flow. I don’t know if it’s just me, but you seem like a guy who’s overthinking everything. That’s not good for you, so promise me that you won’t jump to any conclusions before you even have the chance to get to know the guy properly.”

That was the truth. Besides their mutual attraction, had he made any effort to get to know Maddox? Not really. Actually, Maddox had been the one to freely offer details about his life and ask Jonathan about his. He, on the other hand, had been defensive and hadn’t cared about learning more.

Even if he weren’t ready to talk about the mess that was his past, that didn’t mean that he should keep from learning as much as he could about the real Mad Dawg. Maddox had promised him that he would tell him the story behind that moniker, and he only needed to wait for their month of hooking up to end to get there.

He shook his head. What was he thinking? It was even more dangerous to get to know Maddox. The BMOC of Sunny Hill was like nothing he had imagined such a person would be. It was so easy to like him due to his easygoing personality, a personality that shouldn’t have come attached to such stunning looks. According to Jonathan’s experience, handsome young men like that were usually assholes, but who was he to apply labels now?

“I can tell you’re thinking of how to tell him how much you like him,” Ray said, forcing him out of his mental torment.

“I am not,” he protested.

Ray grinned. “I’ll keep my fingers crossed. Gosh, you make such a beautiful couple.” He did that swooning thing again.

“For the record, Ray, you sound just like a grandma.”

At that, his roommate made a sour face. “Definitely not. But I won’t worry about you. If you’re not gutsy enough to tell him how you feel, he’ll surely tell you.”

He would say something, for sure, but nothing like what Ray thought. Tonight was about getting over it, after all. But first, they would enjoy a delicious meal, and then a session of delicious sex...

Good thing Ray had already said goodbye while he was still wrapped up in his thoughts. He sighed from the depths of his soul as he grabbed the bottle of wine. He had never had that kind of sex, and Maddox hadn’t ever been with a boy, but he knew that it was going to be an unforgettable experience.

One that would mark him forever, but there was no turning back from it now, unless Maddox suddenly decided he didn’t want them to sleep together, after all. Now that was something to keep his hopes high for, he thought, a forlorn sensation flooding his entire being.

He was overthinking things, as Ray said. It was just sex. He would have it and be done with it. His attraction toward Maddox would finally reach its apex, and they would be done, whatever that meant.

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A flutter of anticipation was making his belly feel a little funny. What the hell was wrong with him? He had hooked up for like dozens of times, right?

Yeah, a tiny voice told him, but never with someone like Jonathan. The dude was freaking unique; Maddox couldn’t recall if he had ever met anyone remotely similar for the simple fact that no one else had ever made him feel like this. The symptoms of a crush were all there. But at this point, he suspected that what he felt was more than a crush.

Whatever, he tried to downplay the butterflies in his stomach. While Dex and Kane had been there, teasing him, it had been easy to keep a calm face and not think too hard about what he would do once Jonathan was there, but now, he was all alone with his thoughts.

Would he live up to expectations? After all, it wasn't like he had ever done a dude in the bum. And Jonathan's bum was something else. All it took was to remember how it felt to grab those perky buttocks and pinch them, and his cock got rock hard. How would it feel to slide his cock between them, enjoying all that friction?

Damn, now his cock wanted more of that imagination-fueled fantasy. Maybe he could jerk off once. A short look at his phone convinced him that there was no time for that, so he let out a frustrated sigh. If Jonathan was on time, which he suspected he would be, seeing how serious he was all the time, there was no way he could squeeze that in.

Why hadn't he thought of that earlier? Now he'd have to sit there with a hard-on, while Jonathan played the chef, torturing him with that gorgeous body of his. At that rate, he was sure to lose it. Fuck, he would make a total fool of himself and come too fast.

The first time. There was that. He would surely keep Jonathan in bed for more than once, or else his confidence was doomed.

The bell startled him. "Shoot, I'm going crazy here," Maddox mumbled under his breath.

He rushed to the door and pulled Jonathan inside by the front of his shirt.

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Jonathan gasped in surprise as Maddox jumped him the moment they were inside and the door closed behind them. He almost dropped the thermal bag. Maddox grabbed it from his hand, dashed to the refrigerator and stuffed it in there, and then turned toward him with a wild look in his eyes. Cautiously, he placed his shoulder bag on the floor by the door.

"Um, are we in a hurry?" he asked, fairly alarmed.

"Don't talk," Maddox warned him and then grabbed him again, making him stumble toward the sofa in the living room.

His shirt, which he had painstakingly ironed during the afternoon, was pulled out of his pants as Maddox climbed on top of him. He was sure his moans were anything but flattering, but he couldn't help it. His mouth was being devoured by hungry lips and teeth. A bit stupidly, he thought of how he had been right to suggest cooking something to stave off their hunger first since his host appeared to be quite famished.

Whatever Maddox had, Jonathan matched it. A good diagnosis would be fever because their bodies felt so hot wherever they touched. It took little effort to push their pants down, and soon they were humping, cock against cock, right there on the sofa. Any thought of reasoning with Maddox was gone from his mind. All that mattered was that skin on skin friction that promised that they wouldn't last long.

As engrossed as he had been with all the preparations for their special night, Jonathan had forgotten how he should have taken care of other things, like not behaving like a horny dog the moment he was in the other's presence.

At least Maddox was just as much into it as he was, and that was a bit of consolation.

"Fuck, this feels so good," Maddox whispered and adjusted his position to grab both their cocks and rub them together fast.

Jonathan couldn't manage any words at his point. The only thing he could do was to straighten himself up on his elbows so that he could stare helplessly at how Maddox was handling both of their cocks. The heads were glistening now, and they were providing enough lubrication to make the handjob feel fantastic. He watched in disbelief as the peak of his passion overtook him, and his cock erupted like a fountain. Maddox followed shortly thereafter, making their cum mingle, rope after beautiful rope of white.

He collapsed on his back with a groan, and Maddox landed on top of him. "I think you can start cooking now."

"Thank you," Jonathan mumbled. "Just give me five minutes or so."

Maddox shifted to find a more comfortable position, settling his head against the crook of Jonathan's shoulder.

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He hadn't planned to jump Jonathan's bones the moment he had come through the door, but he wasn't surprised at all by his own actions. After all, this guy was making him reconsider everything he knew about himself, and he needed to pay the price for it. Preferably, with his hot sexy body.

After a short trip to the bathroom to clean themselves, they were now supposedly following through with the initial plan, which meant that Maddox was watching Jonathan as he placed something inside the oven and got busy with a sauce that smelled like it had to be something gods had on their table on special occasions. He didn't dare to say a thing, settling for watching the other, his eyes at half-mast, still feeling pleasantly spent after they had humped each other like dogs only a little earlier.

"I had no idea if you had wine glasses, so I brought two," Jonathan explained. "And I'm very glad they didn't break."

That had to be a jab at how Maddox had grabbed Jonathan's bag the moment he had set foot inside and thrown it inside the fridge. How could he know there were glasses inside?

To his surprise, Jonathan took two bell-shaped glasses wrapped in brown paper from his shoulder bag and placed them on the table. Ah, so that was where they were. Phew, dodged a bullet there. He doubted Jonathan would like to drink wine from disposable plastic cups.

“You’re right, I don’t have wine glasses.” This dude was ready for everything, it seemed.

Only the way he kept brushing the hair at the back of his head told a different story. Maddox couldn’t tell if Jonathan had butterflies in his stomach, like he had, but he surely wasn’t unaffected.

Still, he was incredibly chill as he took the wine bottle out of the thermal bag he had come with and placed it on the table. “We need to leave this out to reach the right temperature.”

Was he dreaming? Maddox pinched himself and made a face to make sure that Jonathan noticed.

“What is it?”

“I had no idea you wanted to make it that special. I would have picked up some scented candles or something.”

Jonathan frowned slightly. “I find their smell overbearing.”

“Then I did good,” Maddox concluded. “But seriously, you make me feel like such an uneducated Neanderthal. You came here with wine and whatever it is you’re making, and it smells like freaking heaven, and I jumped you at the door.”

The small precious smile was back, much to Maddox’s satisfaction. He was sure no one else was capable of putting it there. He did it all. It was his doing. Jonathan surely didn’t smile for anyone else like that.

“I don’t mind your Neanderthal side.”

Was Jonathan blushing while saying that? Maddox could feel his dick twitching with new anticipation. Gosh, how was he going to look while getting fucked? Maddox had to revise his projected fantasy of having Jonathan on all fours first. No way he would do him like that. He would be on his back so that they could look at each other.

Maddox placed his hands behind his head and let his eyes wander all over Jonathan. “You don’t?”

“Why would I? After all, I’m not far off from being a caveman myself when it comes to you.”

“Just so you know, I usually do a better job of controlling my horniness. It isn’t working lately though.”

“Your family,” Jonathan began, changing tack, “they must be amazing. Seven kids, that’s a full house for sure.”

Maddox didn’t mind talking about himself if that was something Jonathan wanted. “Mom loves kids. One or two weren’t enough for her, and dad just went with the flow, I guess.”

“What does your dad do?” Jonathan asked.

“They run a construction company, mom and dad together. Mom is with the money side, and my oldest brother, Vernon, also works there. I help them during summers, as much as I can.”

“Ah, so that explains the calluses on your hands.”

Maddox looked at his palms. Jonathan was right about that, but he hadn’t ever given it much thought. Yet, it meant that the other had paid a lot of attention to him and maybe stared at him a lot. He grinned at the realization. As much as he liked to believe that he could read Jonathan, it wasn’t that easy, and even a detail like that pleased him.

Unless –

“Do they bother you or something? When I touch you?”

Jonathan offered him that small smile, and there was more of that blush. “No, not at all.” A short silence followed. “I love your hands.”

What would happen if your jaw suddenly fell to the floor? Could it be glued back on, just like that? Maddox touched his chin gingerly to check if that part of his anatomy was still there. To his relief, it was. “Hmm, and what else do you love?” he challenged, stretching lazily, his arms on the table, and his head resting against his right elbow while looking up at Jonathan.

“Stop fishing for extras. I don’t intend to tell you anything else.”

Maddox pouted. “You’re no fun. Why are you blushing so much? We just had some kind of sex on the sofa in the living room.”

“Well, that must be the reason then,” Jonathan said a bit snappily, something he tried to disguise by turning his head. “I should check the meat.”

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How many times had he told himself that he would be cool about it all? The hopeless romantic Jonathan Hamilton had been left behind, stashed away in his past, and he very much wanted him to stay there. Yet, right now, he wished for nothing more than to hear Maddox say what he thought about the roasted pork and cherry sauce. He wanted to groan at how pedestrian that sounded. What was he hoping for? Even if Maddox loved his food, it didn’t mean that he would love –

Absolutely, he would not go there. To steer clear of the torment inside his mind, he reached for his glass.

“Should we like toast or something?” Maddox asked, picking up his glass, too.

“Sure, why not?” Jonathan clinked his glass against the other’s. “To getting over it, right?”

A small frown darkened the beautiful grey eyes. “Nah, that’s a little weird. For a great first anal fuck.”

Jonathan stopped the wine from going down the wrong way just in time but did so with incredible difficulty.

“Are you choking? ‘Cause I didn’t think you could,” Maddox said with a naughty glint in his eyes.

“I’m starting to think,” Jonathan replied after taking a deep controlled breath, “that you’re not actually hungry.”

“Your food is fantastic, but I can only think of you know what,” Maddox said with a self-explanatory roll of the eyes.

“Are you suddenly shy? Just earlier, you used some uncouth words.”

“Yeah, but seeing how we’re risking you needing the Heimlich maneuver, it looks like I have to tone down my speech.”

Jonathan patted his mouth with a napkin. Maddox stared at him like he wanted to eat him instead of the meal on the table. “Then, we should do this,” he said in the coolest voice he could muster.

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He felt out of sorts, not knowing how to act. Good thing Maddox didn’t appear to have fallen prey to the same affliction and was bouncing happily on the bed.

“Come on, striptease, striptease,” Maddox began chanting.

Jonathan rolled his eyes. “Seriously? We’ve gotten naked together before, haven’t we?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t have time to look at you properly since I was busy with other things,” Maddox said promptly. “So take your clothes off, but do it slowly.”

Surely he looked positively awkward as he pulled his sweater over his head. How could one turn that into a lascivious play? It seemed impossible. His hands trembled slightly as he began to unbutton his shirt, starting with the cuffs. All the while, he decided to look anywhere else but at Maddox.

“You’re so freaking elegant,” Maddox commented.

That was a rather peculiar thing to say, Jonathan thought as he stole a furtive look at his host and soon to be sexual partner. Then he couldn’t look away, especially since a strong hand was palming an obvious erection through tight jeans. Even if he was already well aware of how that looked sans clothes, he couldn’t tear his eyes away.

“Hey, I said slowly, but not so slowly,” Maddox teased him. “Ah, fuck, show me more of that sexy bod.”

Jonathan knew his looks were above average, but definitely not something that would turn the former king of hookups into someone else. Therefore, those praises made him all the happier because they came as a surprise.

“I’m sure that you only need to look in the mirror to see something much more enticing,” he commented as he shed his shirt and pulled the undershirt over his head.

“Nah, I like your body better. That innie belly button is so cute.”

Jonathan looked down at his body. He doubted his navel could elicit much interest, but Maddox might have a particular fetish, so who was he to disagree?

“I’d so love to put my tongue in there.”

A small shiver coursed through his body. The sudden image of Maddox moving down and sticking out his tongue only so that he could tease his belly button was enough to make certain parts of his anatomy stand at attention in the most hopeless manner.

“You’d love that, right?” Maddox teased him some more, mercilessly.

“I don’t know. Nobody has ever licked my belly button,” Jonathan explained.

His hands rested on his belt. He could feel his cock pulsing so hard just a little south of there that he could only be thankful that his pants fit just right without being too tight.

“I intend to lick you everywhere.” Maddox had now pulled his cock out of his jeans. “You’re just so smooth and smell so nice.”

Jonathan wasn’t sure he wanted to hear more of that. If Maddox didn’t stop talking, he was in real danger of coming in his pants like a boy seeing his first porno. He pushed his pants down swiftly and stepped out of them.

“Nice. Now turn, do a one-eighty,” Maddox whispered. “Oh, fuck, how come even your underwear is so sexy?”

“They’re just ordinary briefs,” Jonathan commented as he obeyed.

“Then it must be that sexy ass of yours that makes them look like that,” Maddox replied. “Now show me.”

“What?” Jonathan murmured.

“Show me that thing that I’ve been dreaming of fucking for freaking weeks.”

Jonathan gulped. So much for playing cool. Things were about to get very much real.

## *Chapter Seventeen – A Story Of Firsts*

Totally, a part of him liked to torture Jonathan even if it meant that he put himself through the wringer in the process. His cock was at the point of bursting, and the earlier session on the sofa, as hot as it had been, was totally gone from his mind. Definitely, that hard throbbing part of his anatomy couldn't remember a thing and now wanted to sneak into a certain enticing hole.

"I'm not going to show you my asshole," Jonathan protested. "This is getting ridiculous."

"Oh, yeah? Then please turn and face me so I can see just how ridiculous you think this is."

Jonathan moved but kept his hands linked in front of his midsection.

"Nah-ah, no cheating. Take your hands away."

An unintelligible mumble accompanied obeying his order, making Maddox's grin stretch wider. Jonathan was totally pitching a tent and, frankly, Maddox was glad that the sexy briefs hadn't come off yet, because there was something he wanted to do very much. "Come here," he ordered.

There were no protests as Jonathan climbed on the bed, but his whole body was tense, and uncertainty lurked in the amber eyes. Maddox reached for him and cupped his cheek. "Don't worry so much. Right now, I just want to kiss you."

A small exhalation followed, and Jonathan aligned his body with his so that they could kiss. However, he didn't sit there passively but moved one hand and wrapped it around Maddox's erection and rubbed it slowly.

Maddox surely didn't want to be left behind, so he snuck one hand around to grab Jonathan's ass. His fingers reached under the briefs and went for the prize. Gosh, he wanted this so much, even if it killed him to think that it could be over once they were finished.

Nah, he wasn't afraid anymore. Jonathan's mouth was freaking addictive, if only for those mad kisses, and he wouldn't get over it so easily. The guy kissed with everything he had, and he was the kind of kissing fiend Maddox loved the most. Their breathing was growing increasingly difficult as they devoured each other's mouths, tongues wrestling.

He broke it off only in order to look at Jonathan and get the confirmation he wanted. The amber eyes were hazy, and they were so much more beautiful from up close. Maddox brushed his nose against Jonathan's playfully and earned a small giggle in return. "I have no idea about you, but my cock is threatening to detach itself so that it can sneak behind you and bury itself in your ass."

Jonathan caressed his jawline and gave him a small kiss. "We can't have that, right?"

He surely tried to play it cool, but his cheeks were on fire, and his lips were adorably swollen from their kisses.

“I suppose I should get into position,” Jonathan said and bit his bottom lip.

“Yeah. On your back,” Maddox said.

“Um, you sure? I think I should--”

“We’ll do it doggy style later,” Maddox said promptly.

Jonathan didn’t seem too convinced but lay on his back. Maddox grinned and pulled down his briefs, his cock prancing happily once out of its confines. Remembering his promise, he dunked his tongue directly into Jonathan’s belly button, earning an instant gasp of surprise. Too bad he couldn’t be bothered with too much teasing at this point, so he just gave it a small lick before going lower and brushing his lips against a glistening mushroom head in passing.

He smirked as he stood at the edge of the bed and began undressing. Since no buttons of any kind stood in the way, his striptease show was short-lived.

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Now he understood what Maddox meant by wanting to take a good look at him. Just watching the other undress was the sweetest type of torture. He liked Maddox’s body in the extreme, all that manly hair in all the right places. It was true that he preferred his own body smooth, but just now he realized that it might have been his secret plan to keep it that way so he could experience rubbing his skin against a body like that.

And that amazing cock, so hard for him right now, was designed to render him speechless. Jonathan let out a long breath, trying to release the tension he felt building inside him. Maddox didn’t allow him much time to admire the sight in front of him and climbed on the bed again with a naughty glint in his eyes.

Jonathan released a small confused whimper as Maddox pushed his legs up and stared directly under his balls.

“Hold them,” Maddox said, and Jonathan grabbed his legs.

He felt so vulnerable, exposed like that, and it appeared that Maddox was comfortable down there, spreading his ass cheeks and tuning in his entire attention to a single point.

“You and I, we’re going to be great friends,” Maddox said.

“Um, okay, but how about looking at me when you say that?” Jonathan asked, his breathing uneven, growing more ragged by the second. Suddenly, he had weird thoughts about that certain part of his anatomy. Was it enough to convince an experienced guy like Maddox to fuck it?

“Hush, I wasn’t talking to you. I was talking to this little hole.”

“Really? I think it’s part of my body.”

Maddox hummed under his breath and used his fingers to tease Jonathan’s asshole. “It’s so smooth. Unlike you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re cactus-level prickly,” Maddox replied promptly. “But not this thing. Oh, fuck, I’m going to lick it.”

“Maddox, no!”

“Too late.”

Jonathan moaned instantly the moment he felt something wet and naughty pressing against his backdoor. He had no idea it would feel like this. Fantasies notwithstanding, reality didn’t come close to this, for the simple fact that it belonged somewhere up, up, outside the known universe. Pressing the back of his hand over his mouth to prevent other shameless sounds from escaping, he found himself dizzy with too much pleasure.

Maddox moved his tongue slowly. It could be that he had had plenty of practice, but Jonathan didn’t want to let his mind wander there. Thinking of Maddox in the arms of nameless faceless girls made him feel possessive, and this game was not about ownership. He was simply being granted the realization of a fantasy of the best kind, so enjoying it and letting worries pass were the only course of action he should take.

Who knew nerve endings would be only skin-deep there? He had touched himself, surely, teased around, but nothing, absolutely nothing compared to the feeling of being probed so gently with that softer-than-velvet tongue. He could die. Much to his relief, Maddox didn’t insist on continuing his rimming for long, eager, most probably just like he was, to get to more practical things.

“Thanks,” he mumbled weakly.

Maddox’s playful chuckle did nothing for his nerves. “You’re welcome. I definitely like eating you out.”

Another hitched breath followed as Maddox teased his balls, this time with a long swipe of the tongue.

“You’re bent on making me come before you even put your cock inside me,” Jonathan accused.

“So damned sensitive. I like it,” Maddox declared. He straightened up and pushed his fingers against Jonathan’s hole, exploring slowly.

Jonathan risked a look. Maddox loomed above him, looking as ridiculously sexy as always. His hair had gotten a bit in his eyes, and he had a satisfied grin on his face. He was so close he could touch him, so Jonathan did and ran one hand over Maddox's cheek and then brushed the hair back. There, now he could look at his face and take in every line of that handsome masculine face. Something to remember later.

"Are you having second thoughts?" Maddox asked, a bit alarmed by the look in his eyes.

"With your dick poised to enter my ass? I wouldn't do that," Jonathan said, shaking off the worrisome thoughts that never left him alone.

"Ah, so you don't want to be cruel to me, right?"

"And myself," Jonathan replied and pulled Maddox in for a kiss.

His tongue was so sweet that one could live off it forever, yet still crave more.

Maddox broke the kiss. "I'm doing you raw, right?"

The question, loaded with hope and desire, brought him back to reality. He nodded, not daring to speak a word. Maddox, naked on top of him, his bare cock in his ass – that was the stuff fantasies were made of.

"So, this is the part where we get the lube," Maddox said.

Jonathan stared at him, dazed and beyond help. Maddox's kisses always left him a bit daft. He watched the other moving about, his bobbing cock drawing his gaze more than anything right now. "Wait, I did bring some," he said as he finally remembered.

"No worries," Maddox said and showed him a tube filled with clear liquid while climbing on the bed. "The least I could do was be ready for this."

Oh, he was ready if the leaking head of his cock was any indication. Jonathan felt overpowered by a desire to stick his tongue in the little eye and lick every last drop. So he reached for it and brought it close to his mouth, ignoring Maddox's slight protests as he was being forced to straddle Jonathan's chest.

"Why are you so good at this?" Maddox moaned.

"Practice," Jonathan said with a smile.

Maddox's cock was rock hard in his hand, making him tremble in anticipation. How would it feel inside him? He licked the head from all sides, his eyes shooting up at the other from time to time.

“Fuck, you were made to take cock,” Maddox praised him while running a hand through Jonathan’s hair.

The lewd comment made him shudder with new want. He would keep Maddox there, teasing him if it meant that he could hold him forever. But that wasn’t why they were there. “How about we test that theory?” he made an attempt at a joke, but his voice was low and hoarse.

Maddox smiled and moved down on his body. “So, any last words?”

“What?” Jonathan asked.

“You know, as a virgin boy.”

Oh, gawd, this boy and his funny side. “Just fuck me,” he said.

The grey eyes twinkled. “Say ‘please’?”

Jonathan snorted, but Maddox’s fingers, now coated with lube, teasing his entrance, brought the excited shivering back. “Please fuck me, Maddox,” he said in a heated voice that he could barely recognize as his own.

“Happy to,” Maddox teased him, but his voice was low and deep, too.

Why were they in this position? Jonathan had hoped for the mercy of being taken from behind, so that he didn’t have to look at Maddox too much that first time. A part of him wanted it, oh, wanted it so badly, but memories like that were bound to turn into tiny heart scars as time passed.

Even so, he told himself, no regrets for now. He wrapped one hand around the back of Maddox’s neck, and rested his other just above that curvy ass. His fingers inched along the crack while Maddox pressed the head of his cock against his hole.

Jonathan took one deep breath. It was no secret that it would hurt some, but he was ready for it. Still, the first sting took him slightly by surprise.

“I need to go slow,” Maddox mumbled under his breath. “Fuck, you’re so tight.”

“Sorry about that,” Jonathan whispered.

Maddox leaned in and kissed him while pressing him hard against the bed. The weight on him, the nice smell of the other’s skin, were soothing in a way. He could still feel the hard cock, patient but relentless at his backdoor, but he was getting used to the stretch. Maddox moved away, making him whimper at the loss.

“We need more of this,” Maddox explained, grabbing the lube again.

The teasing fingers came back, this time going deeper and moving around. Jonathan gasped and moaned as new sensations filled him. He truly needed to stop staring at Maddox; the mere sight of him was too much, and there was a new feeling pooling inside his groin with each slow thrust of the skillful fingers. “Enough,” he said raggedly, “I need you inside now.”

Maddox didn't joke around and aligned his cock again. This time, he went a little deeper, but by the strained lines of his face, he was doing his damnest not to go too far too fast. Jonathan pulled him close and pressed on the small of his back. “Now, Maddox,” he whispered.

“You sure? I'm wrecking your ass.”

“Stop flattering yourself. You're not that big,” Jonathan lied only because he couldn't bear another moment of not having Maddox buried to the hilt inside him.

He silenced both their moans by kissing Maddox hard, as the other pushed himself in. To stop himself from wanting to get away, he wrapped his legs around Maddox and pushed his heels into his buttocks.

“Fuck, you're crazy,” Maddox whispered. “Are you sure this is all right?”

“Yes,” Jonathan breathed out. He was so full he felt like choking, but, at the same time, his body craved it. “Give me a second to get used to your girth and then you can move.”

“Glad you have it all figured out,” Maddox said. “Fuck, this feels so nice.”

“It does?” Was he so desperate for validation? Yes, he was, when it came to Maddox. The hard cock throbbing inside his ass provided plenty of that, too.

Maddox caressed his chest and caught a nipple between his thumb and index finger. Jonathan moaned at the new sensation, enjoying how rough that felt. A new wave of arousal hit him, and he barely registered Maddox starting to move, first slowly, then accelerating to a hammering pace.

“Oh, fuck,” he whispered, “you're big.”

“Glad to see you're finally acknowledging the might of my cock.”

He was still capable of joking, but his eyes were hazy and displayed nothing but the soaring desire between them. By now, reality should have caught up with Maddox and, as a straight boy, maybe he should have realized that he didn't really want to fuck a guy's ass. None of that appeared to be happening. If anything, Maddox was growing more and more relentless as he pushed inside him fast while moaning and biting his lips. From time to time, he reached for Jonathan and pulled him in for a kiss.

“Does it feel good at all?” Maddox asked breathily. “Cause on this side, it feels freaking amazing. Fuck, you take me so well.”

“Yes,” Jonathan keened softly as the other’s cock slamming inside him made him experience everything the books and songs talked about, a sensation like no other that had everything to do with his body but not only. He stared down at his cock, slapping against his belly. Maddox surprised him by curling one hand around it and starting to rub it. “Damn, just look at how hard you are,” he said with unhidden admiration.

“It’s because of you,” Jonathan whispered. “Maddox, your cock, inside me, it feels so good.” He didn’t have any better words to describe it.

“You must be a total bottom boy,” Maddox teased him while he matched the movement of his hips with that of his hand on Jonathan’s hard-on.

The sensation grew in intensity. While before it had felt sort of out of reach, now the climax was very much in sight. Maddox buried himself to the hilt, making Jonathan feel his balls against his ass, and squeezed his cock hard, making him squirm helplessly. His pleasure was literally out of his hands, and that thought of complete abandonment should have scared him.

But it was impossible to feel afraid. Maybe he was too aroused, too far gone, to feel anything else.

“Are you?” Maddox teased him more. “Are you a bottom boy?”

There was an unveiled challenge in those words. Jonathan moved the hand he held Maddox’s ass with and teased his crack again. That simple gesture was enough to make Maddox move more desperately and moan louder.

“Maybe you are one, too,” Jonathan teased back. “You can’t tell until you have a huge rod like yours in your ass.”

All the while, his fingers got more daring, earning multiple tiny pleas from Maddox in the form of grunts and under-the-breath curses.

“I can’t fuck myself,” Maddox breathed out, “so I wouldn’t know.”

Jonathan pressed on the hot hole under his fingertips. He couldn’t go too deep from that position, but he could tell Maddox appreciated the teasing. Even if it was probably the kind of thing quickly discarded and forgotten once they finished, it looked like a certain top dog didn’t mind having his backdoor played with.

Maddox kissed him hard and moved his hips amply. Jonathan felt everything, especially the hard cock in his ass, hammering away, and bringing them closer to the point of no return. He shivered and moaned as Maddox jerked him off faster and faster.

The cum erupted so hard from his cock that it hit his chin.

“Fuck, yeah,” Maddox groaned.

Jonathan felt like he was coming forever. His entire body was coming, and he sealed his first time and goodbye to anal virginity by kissing Maddox deeply. Then his cock was let go and his hips grabbed hard. Maddox must have held back until now because he slammed hard inside him and it took him only a few thrusts to announce his victory.

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Maddox lay on his back, completely spent. “Your ass is it,” he let out, first thing.

“Glad you enjoyed it,” came the ragged reply.

Somehow, in the course of it, they had both lost their voices. He pushed himself up on his elbows to look at Jonathan. His smooth chest was covered by a sheen of sweat, and he looked good enough to eat, with all that cum spread all over him. His was inside Jonathan’s ass, and he was so damned curious to see it. If he thought about it now, he had never done it with anyone without a rubber. No relationship before had been serious enough for that to happen. But Jonathan was a virgin - no, correction, he had been - and Maddox had proven his cum was not radioactive.

Beyond the practicalities, however, only a single truth stood: that Maddox had wanted to pump Jonathan’s ass full of cum. He hadn’t thought of that till this dude. Sex was sex; it was good, and it didn’t matter that he always came inside a piece of rubber. But now, he was satisfied in new ways. The moment he had felt his cum flowing freely inside Jonathan, his mind almost shut down on itself like an absolute moron.

“So, how is it? You’re not a virgin anymore.”

“My ass knows that, believe me.”

“Could you turn?”

“Um, why?” Jonathan asked. “How?”

“Just on your side. Back to me. A little.”

Jonathan obeyed and turned his back. Maddox didn’t waste a moment and grabbed a round buttock so that he could stare properly.

“What are you doing?” Jonathan asked over his shoulder.

“I came in your ass,” Maddox said and grinned.

The amber eyes twinkled at him. “Without a doubt. I very much feel it.”

Maddox played around the hole, spreading the cum. Jonathan whimpered softly. “What else do you feel?”

“Like your cock molded the inside of my ass into something else,” Jonathan said.

And that was also most satisfying. “Good.” Maddox slapped Jonathan’s ass once quickly, earning a small offended gasp from the other. “I can barely wait to do you from behind.”

“Are you sure? You came an entire gallon inside my ass already,” Jonathan complained.

“Trust me, baby,” Maddox said playfully, “there’s more where that came from.”

“Really? How much? I need to prepare mentally for it.”

He could joke. That pleased Maddox because hey, he doubted anyone else could brag that Jonathan liked to joke around with them. He leaned in and kissed a sweaty shoulder. “Fuck, I think I want you again.”

“You think?” Jonathan didn’t turn to face him but searched for Maddox’s cock with one hand. “Oh, you are indeed hard again.”

“All it took was playing with my cum in your ass. You wouldn’t believe the sight. I should take a picture.”

“No, you shouldn’t.” Jonathan’s voice was brusque and his hand moved away from Maddox’s cock.

“All right,” Maddox agreed. Whatever that was, Jonathan didn’t like having his pictures taken or something. It wasn’t like he would show such things around, but right now, he didn’t have time to dwell on his reasons. Or to spoil the mood by saying the wrong stuff. “I mean it,” he insisted as he felt the other tensing. “It was just a manner of speaking, nothing more.”

He took Jonathan by the shoulder and turned him. “Would it help if I said ‘cross my heart and hope to die’?”

To his relief, Jonathan smiled and kissed him. “Yeah, it would help,” he teased.

But he didn’t allow him to say another word as he kissed him more, deep and demanding. Maddox didn’t mind having Jonathan on top, but he was too keen on his promise to take the guy from behind.

So he grabbed Jonathan’s ass cheeks and squeezed them hard. “Doggy style, babe, right now.”

“Babe,” Jonathan repeated and snickered like a kid. “Oh, I’m such a babe,” he said in a false coquettish voice.

“Okay, hunk, should I call you that?”

Jonathan shrugged. “Call me whatever you like.” He let go of Maddox so he could place himself on all fours.

“Yeah, babe,” Maddox teased him, “let me see you wiggle that ass.”

To his surprise, Jonathan threw him a sultry look and began moving his ass in what looked pretty much like twerking.

“What the hell did you learn at your all-boys school? How come you know how to twerk?”

Jonathan laughed and hid his face in the crook of his elbow. Maddox wasted no more time and placed himself behind him, hands on the naughty buttocks challenging his cock to do something already.

“I didn’t learn it there, obviously,” Jonathan replied in a whisper. “Just on my own.”

Maddox snickered. “Your choice of hobbies is something, Hamilton. No wonder you can drive me crazy with one look.”

Okay, so that sounded pretty lame, but it was true. It had been enough for Jonathan to look at him, that first time, and Maddox had felt like he needed to know what the dude’s deal was all about. And that had quickly turned into an overwhelming attraction that he didn’t even struggle to fight anymore. He had gotten the boy where he wanted him, on all fours, presenting his ass, ready to surrender.

The first time had been mind-blowing, but right now, Maddox wanted to make it count and pay attention to everything because Jonathan deserved all of it.

“Are you going to put it in already?” Jonathan stopped his train of thought. His voice was a tiny bit strained, and only then Maddox realized that he had been pressing his thumb inside the pretty hole, teasing it for a while now. He had come so much that there was still plenty of his cum in there.

That was a most satisfying thought. “Just look at your ass swallowing my meat,” he said with unhindered wonder in his voice as he began to push inside.

“I can’t really look, so stop torturing me,” Jonathan complained in a breathless voice. “I thought it would feel smaller the second time,” he added. “Or that my ass wouldn’t be so tight anymore.”

Slipping inside was easier, but otherwise, Jonathan was right. His ass was still deliciously tight, massaging Maddox’s cock along its length, and it was pure pleasure just to go in and out and

enjoy the friction. With this guy, everything felt like conquering new territories, and Maddox didn't mind being the victor at all. He moved his hands, pressing against the firm ass cheeks, pulling them slightly apart so that he could enjoy that sight more. With satisfaction, he touched the rim of Jonathan's hole, now tenderer and slightly puffy. No wonder there, Jonathan was right that his ass was feeling it and would feel it later, too.

There was no better reward than that. He had put his mark on this person, something that they wouldn't forget forever. And in a way, it was a story of firsts for the both of them. For Jonathan, things were clear. No matter what the Asshole had meant to him, Maddox was his first man, his first proper fuck, and there was no way around it. As for Maddox, it was his first time with a boy, and again, the first time doing it raw, and it felt like it meant more than just the kinkiness of it should have.

Between them, there now existed a sort of intimacy that neither had shared with anyone else before in their lives. No way could this be just a hookup, Maddox decided. He was bent on getting Jonathan on his back, all fours, sides, or whatever, plenty of more times. With low grunts, he pushed himself inside the welcoming hole, making Jonathan gasp and moan with each thrust.

With girls, he had been considerate, not ever going full in, their slim bodies too fragile in his mind to be as hard as he wanted. But Jonathan's muscles were supple under his fingers and hard, and a new sense of satisfaction grew inside him as he realized that, just as Rusty had said, this dude could take it.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," he groaned as his body slammed hard against the other's. "Jonathan, can you feel me?"

"To the back of my throat," Jonathan said back in a strained voice.

Fuck. He was too rough. He needed to slow down.

"Harder," Jonathan pleaded with him.

He could tell that the other was rubbing his cock, supporting his weight on just one arm. Sweat was pooling at the small of his back, and Maddox was in love with the sight.

"Faster," Jonathan ordered, his voice more urgent.

Maddox dug his fingers into the sturdy hips and began moving with complete abandon. His cock was in fucking anal heaven, enjoying going so deep and fast and hard. He heard Jonathan grunting and moaning and felt the walls of muscles around his cock pulling close, a sign that the other was surely coming from all that hammering.

He couldn't keep from coming now if it killed him. It was the best fuck of his life, without a doubt. He held Jonathan's ass impaled on his cock as he came and came, filling that freaking awesome opening with more of him until he felt like he couldn't go any higher.

His cum came gushing out of Jonathan's ass the moment he let go. "Fuck me," he whispered and laughed.

"Maybe another time," Jonathan teased him and collapsed on his belly.

"Nice try, bottom boy," Maddox teased back and slapped the gorgeous ass in front of him playfully.

Jonathan was breathing hard and said nothing, probably too tired to get into any argument, no matter how superficial. Maddox stretched out by his side and threw a possessive arm over his body.

"Jonathan," he said in a much more serious voice, "that was amazing, for real."

The amber eyes searched his face. "I'm glad you liked it," came the whispered reply.

"What about you?" Maddox asked.

"Do you really need to ask?"

"Yeah, I do."

Jonathan examined him again for any signs of teasing. "I'm at a loss for words. I was expecting to hurt more, to be more uncomfortable, you know? But I guess you know your thing."

His thing. Like in being an experienced fuckboy. Maddox hadn't any idea why that bothered him.

"It's not like I've fucked other dudes before you."

Jonathan scooted closer and kissed him sweetly. "And I'm so happy you haven't."

No matter how clumsy both of them were, that was simply the truth. That they were both happy to be each other's first.

## *Chapter Eighteen – Good Advice*

Jonathan lingered by the side of the bed, taking in Maddox's body as he lay on his belly, his arms tucked under the pillow. He had placed a blanket over him so he could no longer admire that gorgeous body, but maybe it was for the best since the time for living fantasies was over, and he needed to get back to reality with all that entailed.

Maddox was even prettier when asleep. His lips curled into a small smile as he appeared to have the most pleasant of dreams. As much as his heart ached, Jonathan risked a touch to Maddox's cheek and drew an invisible line along his jaw. He stopped when he reached his chin and brushed his fingers slowly against the full lips.

Well, they had done it, so there was no point in overstaying his welcome. He had taken a very short shower, all the while taking care to not wake Maddox up. For starters, he didn't think his ass could handle a third round, and secondly, he didn't have it in him to spend any more time in Maddox's company.

It had been the best time of his life, but going further with this was a mistake. How foolish of him to think that he could separate matters of the body from those of the heart. It was easy to fall in love with a boy like that, and Jonathan had promised himself not to get another serious case of history repeating. So what was he doing right now? If anything, he appeared to have miraculously forgotten the harsh lessons life had served him.

Maddox wasn't Drew, but little could be done to change the fact that he was a straight guy. At some point, he would move on. And Jonathan wasn't sure he could do that; no, that weak part of him would want more. So, it was for the better to cut and run while the damage was not too extensive, and he could still deal with it.

He would sneak out and head over to his dorm while Ray was still out partying for the rest of the night. Then, he would attempt to wash away some of the memories that had been made tonight while taking a longer shower and thinking over his transgressions that only seemed to complicate his life.

He snuck out, making sure to open and close the door without making too much noise. Why was his heart in his throat, though? What he was doing right now felt final, in a way. Definitely, tomorrow, Maddox would have cooled down considerably and they would become, not friends surely, but mere acquaintances. And Jonathan would be fine with it because that was the correct thing to do.

He moved stealthily as he went down the stairs and grabbed his shoulder bag. One last breath and he would be out.

Lost in thought and looking down, he was surprised to crash into someone as he turned toward the door.

“Rusty,” he said, struggling to keep his voice down, when he noticed who it was. “Hi.”

Maddox’s friend was right there, which seemed a bit strange, seeing how he was the soul of the party everywhere he went. Around the campus, shindigs must be still raging on, so what was Rusty doing there? Anyway, it wasn’t his business what Rusty did.

Maddox’s roommate was dressed in a sleeveless shirt that showed off his strong arms and baggy pants that somehow complemented his looks. Compared to Maddox, he was taller and slimmer, and Jonathan had to crane his neck a little to look him in the eye. By the haziness he saw there, he could tell Rusty must have been drinking, and quite a lot.

“Yo, Hamilton,” Rusty said lazily, giving him a slow once-over.

“I’m off,” he said, not wanting to make small talk, especially given the awkwardness of the situation. Could it be that he still smelled of sex, even after that short shower? He was almost sure Rusty was sniffing him, leaning in dangerously close.

“Did you and Maddox fuck?” Rusty asked promptly.

Jonathan tried to get past Rusty, but the guy moved swiftly despite his state of inebriation and blocked his path. “None of your business,” he said coolly.

“You look fucked,” Rusty drawled with a sly smile.

There was something heated and loaded in that voice, and Jonathan was acutely aware of it. “Well, so do you,” he replied in kind as he took in Rusty’s messy hair and what looked like traces of lipstick on his neck and right cheek.

Rusty smirked. “Yeah. By the way, I ate all that steak with the sweet sauce I found. Good shit. Where did you order it from?”

Jonathan had to fight hard against the impulse to push Rusty away and run out the door. “I made it,” he said curtly.

Rusty’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “For real?”

“Yes,” Jonathan replied, thumbing the strap of his shoulder bag and adjusting it although there was no need to.

“And I drank that bottle of wine, too,” Rusty confessed.

“Well, good for you. At least it didn’t go to waste,” Jonathan offered.

What on earth could Rusty possibly want? The guy was making him nervous. It had been so easy that time at the tree for him to overpower Jonathan and tie his hands. He was definitely scary.

“Home cooked food, expensive wine, and anal. Fancy as fuck,” Rusty concluded.

Jonathan sidestepped and pushed Rusty out of the way, not forcefully, but firmly enough to manage to move past him.

“Good night, Rusty,” he said in a controlled voice. His hand was on the door handle when he felt something brushing against his ass. He turned on his heel fast only to see Rusty still there, grinning at him.

Jonathan frowned and pushed himself into the other’s face. “Look here, dog brain,” he said through his teeth and pressed his index finger against Rusty’s chest, “I’m not one of Maddox’s hookups for you to treat me like this.”

Rusty snorted, apparently unfazed by his anger. “You’re not? Does he know?”

Jonathan suppressed the fury boiling inside him. He would not get into a fight over something like this. And Rusty’s words annoyed him to no end. So he chose to turn away and get out, as fast as he could manage.

“Nighty-night, Hamilton,” Rusty called after him. “Don’t let the bedbugs bite that tappable behind.”

Jonathan pressed one hand to his forehead hard, grabbing his temples, and pulled the door closed after him. For these straight boys, he was nothing but a fucking joke.

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Fortunately for him, Ray had left him alone to oversleep and probably he was doing the same thing after partying all night with his girlfriend. Jonathan had heard him coming in last night but hadn’t gone to talk to him since he wasn’t sure he was in any mood to share his experience. Ray would love to hear it all, but what was there to say?

About ten o’clock, his phone began to chirp with incoming messages. He checked only so that he could make sure that he was right about the sender. Maddox probably wondered why he had snuck out last night, but he didn’t have it in him just yet to tell him that they should slow down or stop entirely.

That was assuming Maddox wanted a repeat performance, which he wasn’t even sure about. Could Maddox want such a thing? He was notorious for hooking up with girls and forgetting them the next day. But Jonathan wasn’t a girl, so probably the same rules didn’t apply to him.

Wishful thinking. And Rusty’s words kept swirling in his brain. What could he mean by them? Was Maddox thinking of him as more than just a hookup and had said something to that effect to his friend? Maybe Rusty just wanted to provoke him, for some reason. If he started nurturing any feelings toward Maddox, it would be terribly bad.

Also, he wasn't ready for another hookup, which was more likely what Maddox truly wanted. Had last night been a mistake? Was he turning himself – through no other's fault than his own – into a toy for a straight boy? That was how bad things began. And no matter what Rusty was running his mouth about, he wouldn't do such a thing to Maddox, start rumors that they were dating or something incredible like that.

They weren't dating. Jonathan groaned and covered his eyes. Sooner or later, he would have to get out of bed and face the day. Ray would probably pester him with questions, so he needed to rehearse what he would say so that his roommate didn't smell anything fishy. Surely, his bestie thought that there was some big thing happening between them, which wasn't true.

It had been nothing but hooking up, he repeated the words in his head over and over again. And no matter how amazing it had been, the light of day was bound to make things appear differently.

The most unnerving thing was that Maddox was firing message after message at regular intervals. Jonathan turned on one side and stared bleakly at the wall. Could it be that Maddox had talked about him with his friends in some way that made Rusty feel entitled to do such a stupid thing as touch him in that uncouth manner? The thought was chilling, but he couldn't see Maddox doing something like that.

Or maybe, just maybe, Jonathan didn't want to think of him like that, like the kind of boy who would run his mouth about his conquests in the most disparaging manner. As much as he tried to imagine Maddox making fun of how they kissed or did other things, the picture of that actually happening refused to conjure itself in his mind.

Rusty was quite the character. Jonathan could see him acting on his own impulses. That, of course, begged the question – why had Rusty touched him? Had it been a joke, one that only some bawdy character like that would consider funny?

He left his phone on the bed and traipsed toward the bathroom to brush his teeth and throw some cold water on his face, all the while seriously hoping that Ray was already out with Hannah for brunch or something and wouldn't bug him with questions about his night.

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Maddox frowned as he checked his phone for the umpteenth time. There was no sign that Jonathan had opened even one of his messages. Maybe he had gone a bit overboard, and at least half of what he had said there he wanted to take back, but all that silence on the other end was driving him up the wall.

Last night had been the most amazing time ever, but he hadn't been able to shake off the feeling of disappointment at discovering that, at some point, Jonathan had just upped and left without saying goodbye. In all truth, he had slept like a log after fucking Jonathan's incredible ass twice, so maybe the guy had just gotten bored.

Next time, he'd keep his eyes open or hold Jonathan trapped under him to make sure the same thing didn't happen twice.

Kane and Dex were still sleeping off their hangovers, but Rusty, much to his surprise, was awake. Maddox waved at him and turned his attention to his phone, trying to will it into revealing a sign of life from Jonathan.

Rusty plopped himself down on the sofa by his side, and Maddox just grumbled. He was in no mood to make conversation, not when he wanted nothing else but for Jonathan to pick up the phone already. He couldn't be sleeping so long, could he? Maddox hadn't wrecked him completely, hopefully.

"I ate that thing," Rusty said suddenly.

"Hmm?" Maddox frowned, hoping that his monosyllabic replies would convince his buddy to shut it.

"The thing your boyfriend cooked for you," Rusty insisted. "It was fucking great. I had no idea some dudes could cook like that, unless they're chefs or some shit."

Maddox waved him off impatiently. "Whatever." He had been slightly surprised to see that all the food was gone when he had woken up, but he had paid it little mind.

"And I drank all that wine. It was something expensive, right?"

Maddox sighed and finally looked at Rusty. The guy looked a bit worse for wear. "You look like warmed over shit," he said. "Stop drinking everything you can get your hands on. Didn't you drink enough last night?"

"Yeah, but it was right there," Rusty pointed vaguely, "and it tasted good."

Maddox shrugged and turned his entire attention back to his phone. Rusty remained silent, much to his relief.

"And I touched your boyfriend's ass."

"Hmm," Maddox replied as he flicked through his phone and then he froze. "What?! Say that again." He turned brusquely toward Rusty and blinked hard. Was this silly kinkster trying to pull a prank on him only to see if he was paying attention?

Rusty crossed his hands over his knees and looked him straight in the eye. "I touched," he said slowly, "your boyfriend's ass."

Maddox blinked faster as something dark lowered over his eyes. No wonder Jonathan didn't respond to his texts. He ground his teeth hard and punched Rusty in the face.

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“What the hell is going on here?” Kane and Dex rushed to break them apart.

Maddox was breathing hard and struggled against Kane’s hold. Dex, who was stronger, had his hands full dealing with Rusty who now had a bit of blood under his nose and was sniffing.

“This asshole,” he yelled, “wants a fucking beating! Let me give it to him!”

Dex and Kane were staring at him in disbelief. “What the hell got into you?” Kane asked. “Why would you hit Rusty? Are you picking up this violent shit from your boyfriend?”

Maddox fought against the tide of red he still saw in front of his eyes. “He grabbed Jonathan’s ass!” He pointed at Rusty while Kane, who was bigger and stronger than him, put all his strength into keeping him in place.

“How do you know that? Did he do it in front of you?” Kane asked.

“No, but he told me!” Maddox growled. “Let me just punch that ugly mug! Because of him, Jonathan is ignoring me now!”

“What the fuck, Rusty?” Kane turned toward the culprit.

Rusty was fighting Dex, too, and Maddox really wished these two wouldn’t butt in when they needed to settle this thing and fast.

“Yeah, what the fuck, Rusty?” Dex asked the same thing.

Rusty pushed Dex away. “Screw you all! That guy’s not that big a deal!”

Dex made another move to grab him, but Rusty was quick and rushed up the stairs, thumping with each step, and leaving them all bewildered and staring after him like they were seeing him for the first time in their lives.

Even Maddox was speechless. Kane’s hold had taken the edge out of his anger, but he was still breathing hard. The right side of his face pulsed, which meant that Rusty must have landed at least one hit. Kane grabbed his chin and stared at him. “Let’s get that dealt with.” Maddox didn’t protest as Kane dragged him toward the kitchen.

Dex threw him a sharp look and then walked past them.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Out,” Dex offered.

“Where is Dex going?” Maddox asked, not liking the short exchange between Dex and Kane at all.

“Out,” Kane said in a deadpan voice.

“Like hell,” Maddox tried to struggle again. “He’s doing some of his righteous shit, isn’t he?”

“Just stay still,” Kane ordered and forced him onto a chair. “Don’t move or I’ll kick your ass.” He grabbed something from the freezer and came back. “Here,” he said as he pressed an ice pack wrapped in a towel on the side of his face. “You don’t want this pretty face bruised, right? We can’t have Jonathan not liking you anymore.”

Maddox grumbled and allowed Kane to baby him. “Jonathan didn’t read any of my messages,” he complained. “It’s because of Rusty, the asshole.”

“Just chill for now. We’ll find out why Rusty did that. Just let him cool his hot head.”

“I know why he did it,” Maddox replied. “Because he’s an asshole. He always wants what’s mine.”

“Hey, hey, what’s this all about now? I bet that he was drunk and thought of pulling a stupid prank.”

Maddox batted Kane’s hand away and took the ice pack to hold it himself. “It’s obvious Jonathan didn’t think it was a joke,” he said aggressively. “He must think I’m an asshole, too, by association.”

“There’s no way he believes that,” Kane replied. “If he does, then he’s the asshole.”

“Ever since junior year started,” Maddox continued, deaf to Kane’s reasoning, “Rusty’s just had it bad for me, always rubbing it in my face how much he’s hooking up and shit like that. Like I give a damn. He can fuck the entire campus three-way if he wants, but he doesn’t get to touch my Jonathan’s ass.”

Kane ruffled his hair and snorted. “Maybe he wanted a bit of attention. Thought of that?”

Maddox scowled. “I’ll give him plenty of attention. With these.” He put up his fists.

“Really?” Kane caught his wrists and pushed his hands down. “Stop being so fucking extra for this dude.”

“What?” Maddox stood and pushed Kane away. “You too? What’s so wrong with that?”

Kane hurried after him. Maddox wanted to go to his room and lick his wounds alone, but upstairs was where Rusty was, and he didn’t want to be anywhere near the asshole, or they’d have another throw-down for sure.

“Easy,” Kane said as he pulled him back into a bear hug. “I dig you, man, I do. You’re falling for this guy, and you don’t want anyone else to touch his ass.”

“Thanks,” Maddox replied, feeling slightly vindicated. “You’d get mad if anyone touched Louise’s ass, right?”

Kane sighed. “Got me there. I’d probably floor the fucker. All right. But let’s not forget that Rusty is, well, Rusty. In some weird twisted way, he probably thought he was doing a good thing.”

Maddox sagged in Kane’s hug. After the rush of adrenaline from earlier, he felt the crash coming. “I still think he’s just an asshole. He saw that I was having it good and just wanted to wreck it for some reason.”

“We’ll work on finding out that reason,” Kane promised. “Don’t forget you and Rusty are best friends. You’ve always been.”

It was true. Even if they were a group of friends, Dex and Kane were closer to each other, just as he and Rusty were. Well, that was going to change, because there was no way in hell he could forgive Rusty for pulling something as stupid as that. If the asshole just ruined his chances with Jonathan, he would never forgive him. Never.

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The energetic rap on the front door startled Jonathan. He really hoped it wasn’t Maddox, but who else could it be? If it truly was Maddox, he was ill-equipped to face him. He heard Ray rushing to the door and talking to someone, so he braced for impact.

Ray knocked softly on his door.

“Yes?” Jonathan said in a raspy voice.

“Someone’s here to see you, JJ,” Ray said from behind the door. His bestie surely thought he was still sleepy and didn’t want to bother him.

“You can open the door. Tell him to come in.” Jonathan straightened up and ran his fingers through his hair. He hoped he looked only half as messed up as he felt, because the conversation that was coming wasn’t going to be an easy one.

The door opened, but it wasn’t Maddox walking in with his sexy strut, but Dex Solomon. Jonathan stood promptly and searched Dex’s face with confused eyes. What was this about?

“Why are you here?” he asked, forgetting his manners.

“Can we have a word?” Dex asked, after a short nod that counted as a greeting.

“Sure, sure.” Jonathan gestured toward the only chair in the room. “Please, have a seat.”

Dex sat, making the chair groan. The room seemed so little all of a sudden. Ray had closed the door, supposing, kind soul that he was, that they needed privacy to talk.

“Well?” he asked.

Even sitting, Dex was impressive, so Jonathan chose to stand.

“Did something happen to Maddox?” he continued.

Dex leaned forward and steepled his fingers in front of him, while cocking his head and giving Jonathan a long, pointed look. “Yeah, you could say that. You’re ignoring his messages.”

“I barely woke up,” Jonathan justified himself, pointing at the unmade bed.

“Hmm,” came the noncommittal reply. “How about you stop hiding, Hamilton, and face the music? How about that?”

“I’m not hiding, this is ridiculous, I don’t even know--” Jonathan stopped his tirade on his own. He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Truly, what’s this about?”

“Truly,” Dex mimicked his speech and leaned back in the chair, making it creak dangerously. “Rusty tends to be an idiot, more often than not, but this shit is on you.”

“What shit? What are you talking about?”

Dex observed him some more. Jonathan wasn’t sure what about that look unnerved him so much. “Short succession of events, because seriously, I have a hangover as big as this freaking campus, and I’d like to chill today without having to break up another fight.”

“Fight? What fight?”

“Just listen. So you and Maddox have a nice time, but at some point, Rusty comes in and grabs your lovely ass.”

Jonathan worked his jaw. Dex challenged him for a moment, waiting for him to comment or react to his words.

“Nothing untoward really happened,” Jonathan said in a cool voice.

“Well, it was untoward enough for Rusty and Maddox to get into a fight.”

“That is certainly not my fault.”

“Like hell,” Dex cut his words short. “Why the hell did you let Rusty get away with that?”

Jonathan felt heat rising in his cheeks. “I did nothing of the kind. What exactly do you think happened?”

“The way I see it,” Dex explained, parting his palms, “Rusty was looking for a punch in the face, and you didn’t give it to him. So he needed to ask for it from Maddox. Am I right?”

“What exactly do you want to be right about?” Jonathan asked, hating the defensive tone he had so quickly assumed.

“You didn’t punch Rusty for grabbing your ass.”

“No. But that doesn’t automatically make me a victim,” Jonathan replied and crossed his arms over his chest.

“No. It makes you a coward.”

“No shit.” Jonathan could feel his teeth hurting. “I don’t just go around, throwing punches--”

“You hit Maddox when he tried to kiss you.”

Jonathan closed his eyes and inhaled and exhaled slowly. So Maddox did tell everything to his friends. “Different matter,” he managed with great difficulty.

“Sure it is,” Dex said. Jonathan wasn’t sure if the guy was saying it ironically or not. “Now, listen here, you messed this up, and now Maddox and Rusty are crazy mad at each other. You need to make things right.”

“What?” Jonathan felt anger choking him. “Make what right? That Maddox goes around, telling you guys everything we do together and laughs behind my back? That Rusty is a fucking hooligan who behaves like a dog in heat?”

Dex stared at him, slightly amused. “You’re messed up, Hamilton. I don’t know what your deal is, don’t care, really, ‘cause you’re not my buddy, but Maddox and Rusty are.”

“So, what do you want from me?” Jonathan asked and curled his hands into fists. “To allow your buddies,” he hissed as he emphasized the last word, “to walk all over me? Treat me like I’m some fucking doormat?”

Dex leaned back farther in the chair and gave him an appraising look. “Glad to see there’s life under those preppy clothes. That’s why Maddox likes you, obviously. No, Hamilton, I don’t want you to be a fucking doormat. I want you to stop being one when you deal with my buddies. Fucking kiss Maddox because you want to without being so fucking frightened of whatever it is you think might happen, and slap Rusty silly because that horny dog, yeah, you’re right, needs to be put in his place. Am I being clear enough?”

Jonathan was too angered to see the reason in Dex’s words. “I’ll do whatever the fuck I want. You don’t get to tell me what to do.” To his ears, he sounded petulant and vindictive, but he couldn’t stop himself.

“Tough luck, ‘cause that’s why I’m here. Stop hiding from Maddox and pick up your damned phone.”

Jonathan went purposefully to the door, jerked it open and stood there rigidly. “See yourself out, Solomon. I don’t need the cookie-cutter advice you got from mom and dad.”

Dex stood up from the chair slowly, all the while wearing an annoying smirk. He stopped short of Jonathan, dominating him with his size for a while. “Dad and dad,” he said smugly.

“What?” Jonathan asked.

“That would be ‘cookie-cutter’ advice from my dads,” Dex said.

Jonathan pursed his lips, not knowing what to say. Now wasn’t the time to turn over in his head what that meant and why Dex cared to tell him about it. “Maddox and I just hooked up,” he said brusquely. “No need for all this drama. We’re done. And feel free to tell him and Rusty that their friendship doesn’t have to suffer over such an insignificant thing.”

“You tell them,” Dex said, pushing himself in his face.

Jonathan pressed himself against the door. “Please don’t take advantage of the fact that I cannot, physically, throw you out. Just leave already.”

It was difficult to ignore the low chuckle that accompanied Dex Solomon on his way out, or the hammering of his heart over all that had just transpired. Maddox and Rusty fighting, Dex’s talk about how he was the one allowing...

Allowing what? Other people to treat him badly?

“I know you’ll talk to them,” Dex said with conviction before walking out. “Maddox wouldn’t be so wrong about the guy he’s falling for.”

Food for thought, really. What made this Dex guy so clever, anyway?

## *Chapter Nineteen – You’re Lame And You Know It*

Jonathan pressed his fingers against his temples and groaned. How had Maddox found out about that incident? As much as he had been upset by Rusty taking such liberties with him, the fact that Maddox had gotten into a fight with his friend seemed an exaggerated reaction. Rusty must have told him; there was no other explanation.

And what did Dex want anyway? If Jonathan thought about it, the football player was annoyingly right. It didn’t serve anyone for him to remain cooped up in his room, ignoring Maddox’s messages, and he should explain his part of the story.

He would do it later, though. Dex had given him plenty of things to think about. What about him made people believe that it was all right for them to treat him like he was nothing but a spineless shmuck? Back in the day, Drew had obviously thought that, as he had thrown all those accusations at him so heedlessly, as if there had never been anything between them. Sure, Drew would have had plenty to lose if he had admitted his active role, and especially the illegal things, but throwing Jonathan under the bus so he could come out of it all squeaky clean... that had come easy to him, so, so easy.

Which obviously meant that Dex Solomon wasn’t so wrong in his evaluation of one Jonathan Hamilton. Something in the way he behaved, how he was, allowed others to ignore him and his feelings. Even Maddox, as great a person as he was, considered it acceptable to tell his friends about everything happening between them. Jonathan hadn’t said anything to that extent or level of detail to Ray, and the difference hurt. Where did the private things start and where did they end?

Maybe Maddox had done it without one ounce of ill intent, but it had been enough for Rusty to think Jonathan was nothing but some joke.

Sure, Dex was right. Maddox and Rusty shouldn’t fight over that incident, especially since there was nothing serious going on, Jonathan thought as his mood turned sourer and sourer. It was best for him to distance himself from those boys as fast as he could. The last thing he needed was another scandal.

“Are you all right, JJ?”

Ray’s question startled him. Jonathan hadn’t even realized that he had remained in the hallway, leaning against the wall and ruminating over what to do next.

“I’m...” he wanted to say ‘fine’, but he couldn’t ignore the portion of truth that Dex had just served him in raw form. It made him understand that there was something wrong in how he acted, and he needed to stop right away. “I’m not fine,” he breathed out.

Ray came by his side and leaned against the wall, too. “Did Dex give you a hard time? What for? I’m starting to hate him right now if that’s what he did.”

Jonathan shook his head. “I spent last night with Maddox. Part of it.”

“Was it good?” Ray asked, a bit cautiously.

“Yes.” He nodded eagerly. “But it was only hooking up,” he added quickly. “The thing is, and please, please, Ray, don’t tell anyone about this, not even Hanna, I stumbled upon Rusty on my way out, and he did something stupid, and well, I…” he trailed off, not knowing how to explain it because it suddenly seemed like such a storm in a glass of water.

Ray took his hand. “Let me make you some tea, and you can tell me everything.”

It was a bit laughable that Ray offered such a thing, but Jonathan didn’t mind having someone caring for him. If there was anything he had missed during this time, after his family had believed every word coming out of Drew’s mouth like it was freaking gospel, it had to be exactly that – another soul minding if he didn’t feel well or had a problem.

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“Your love life is so complicated, but also a little funny,” Ray concluded after Jonathan confessed about the way he had come together with Maddox, omitting, of course, the racy parts, and about the thing with Rusty that seemed to have blown out of proportion literally overnight.

“Well, I’m glad I’m making you laugh,” Jonathan said and smiled, too. The moment he had started talking, it felt like everything had been brought into the light of day and no longer seemed so important.

“Maddox is crushing on you so badly,” Ray said and snickered. “Hanna told me he and Rusty have always been very close, they’re like the best bromance ever in the history of Sunny Hill. One that will never be anything more than that,” he added hurriedly and eyed Jonathan with a bit of anxiety.

Jonathan had to chuckle. He surely didn’t worry about Maddox’s bromance with Rusty being anything resembling a problem. On the contrary, he wanted that bromance to live long and prosper. “Well, it looks like I’m about to become some kind of bromance wrecker then. Gawd, I hope Xpress doesn’t get hold of this. I’ll finally be ostracized for life.”

Ray laughed. “Come on, JJ, they can’t find out. I mean, I suppose that Maddox’s friends will keep their mouths shut, just like me. And no one else knows.”

“But doesn’t it frighten you how many things those people writing Xpress appear to know?” Jonathan asked. “That little online publication, I don’t know, there’s something deeply wrong with it.”

Ray dumped a fistful of dried herbs into the boiling pot. Jonathan bit his tongue not to say anything. When your roomie makes you tea, you drink it if it kills you.

“They’re just speculating most of the time. And I don’t think anyone gets hurt,” Ray commented.

“Until they do,” Jonathan murmured, lost in thought for a moment.

Ray came to the table with two steaming mugs and placed one proudly in front of Jonathan. “Does your dislike of silly tabloids have anything to do with that thing from your past you never talk about?”

Jonathan wrapped his hands around the mug. “In a way. Not that I appeared in some tabloid or anything. Thank God, nothing of the kind.” He hesitated. He had unloaded so much already, maybe he could do with a little more.

“What kind did happen, though?” Ray asked. “I mean, forget it, I know you don’t want to talk about it.”

Jonathan exhaled. “You’re right, I don’t. But you’re my bestie and just made tea for me.” He raised the mug in a salute. “Thing is, Ray, I left home and right now I’m no longer on speaking terms with my family.”

“Get out of here!” Ray smacked the back of his hand against Jonathan’s shoulder. “You ran away from home? And did you live on the road? Like a gypsy?”

“I’m afraid nothing as adventurous as that,” Jonathan replied. “The thing is... I mean, my family, they gave up on me when I needed them the most, and... I’m not entirely sure I’ll ever be able to forgive them.” He sighed at the end of that sentence, the strength drained out of him.

“Because you’re gay?” Ray asked slowly, and his big kind eyes filled with compassion.

Jonathan chuckled in the most self-deprecating manner. “Trust me, that was the smallest part of it. Compared to the rest, it must have felt to them like a slight disappointment.” He took a moment to muster the courage to continue. “I’ll give you an abridged version since I don’t think I’m yet capable of revisiting everything in detail.”

Ray place a hand on his arm in a compassionate gesture. “Sure. Say only what you’re comfortable with saying.”

Jonathan took one deep breath. “There was this guy Drew I was fooling around with. Well, he was fooling around. I was very much serious about him. And he was, in retrospect, the kind of person you’re not supposed to get involved with if you have half a brain.”

“A bad boy,” Ray concluded.

Jonathan nodded. “Yes, a bad boy. Sure, that had its appeal. We snuck around, fooled around, played a little too close to the fire. Especially him. The first time I saw him high as a kite, I had no idea what to say. And he told me not to preach, so I didn’t.”

He stopped again.

“Did he press you into doing the same thing?” Ray asked.

“A few times. But he wasn’t the kind to share, and at least I didn’t do drugs because of him. The thing is, we were bound to get caught, and we did.” Jonathan closed his eyes, revisiting that memory only briefly. “In the most embarrassing manner possible, especially for me. And he pushed it all on me, blaming me for everything.”

“For the drugs?”

Jonathan could feel the same tunnel vision narrowing his field of view as it had then. “Not only.” He didn’t continue. “The school didn’t want such a scandal on their hands, but they had one, and measures had to be taken. So, parents were called, students were scolded... and, in the end, everything went hush-hush without getting the police involved. The school surely didn’t want that kind of thing.”

“And your parents?” Ray asked quietly.

“Oh,” Jonathan said, “they stood there, looking at me like they didn’t know me. Like I wasn’t their son. They believed every single word they were told by those strangers and didn’t listen to me at all. For weeks, I lived like a ghost in my own house. Or should I say, their house? I was invisible, no matter how hard I tried to mend things with them. You see, Ray? I committed the unthinkable and created a situation for them that would ruin their image in the world. Not something they wanted to live with, obviously.”

A small snuffle took him by surprise. Jonathan’s eyes softened as he took in Ray who was rubbing his nose and blinking hard. He offered a comforting hand and Ray took it. “I can’t imagine my mom and dad not talking to me,” his roommate said. “I’d probably become dead with grief in a day or so.”

Jonathan laughed and pulled Ray into a hug, as much as the table and tea mugs between them allowed. “See? There’s one reason I don’t talk about these things. They make people cry,” he joked.

Ray sniffled again but then snickered. However, his face was serious when they broke their hug. “It wasn’t your fault, JJ. Sometimes bad things happen to good people.”

Jonathan forced a small smile. “I have my own self to blame for my part in everything. I was blind to who Drew really was, preferring not to see that he was a bad person because I was stupidly in love with him.”

“Hence the thing with not dating bad boys?” Ray asked.

“I suppose so, yes.”

“Well, Maddox is not a bad boy, so you have nothing to worry about,” his roommate said promptly.

“You think? But we only hooked up,” Jonathan insisted, not ready to give up yet on the flimsy armor he had built for himself. He knew Maddox wasn’t a bad boy, but that wasn’t the issue, not by a long shot.

“I mean, I know that Xpress reports a lot of crap to make him into a sexy villain because Sunny Hill apparently doesn’t have one, but it all sounds like make-believe to me.”

“Well, it looks like I don’t have to worry anymore about your believing that tabloid and the incredible things written in there. Let’s drink to that,” Jonathan said and raised his mug.

He took a small sip and his entire face froze in an effort not to turn into a gargoyle grimace, but Ray didn’t hesitate to take a mouthful.

The next moment, he jumped to his feet and rushed to the sink. “Bleargh! What the hell? JJ, don’t drink it,” Ray warned after heaving for a few moments. “I’m sure you’ll die if you do.”

Jonathan laughed but quickly filled a glass with water and handed it to Ray. “Moderation is the key,” he offered. “And I hope Hanna is a bit more adept around the teapot than you are.”

Ray breathed deeply after drinking half the glass of water. “I hope so, too, or we might be the first couple to die because of drinking bad tea. Not a very romantic death, either.”

“I suppose not,” Jonathan said with a small laugh. “Although I’m sure there are even more boring ways to die.”

It truly felt good to have gotten all of that off his chest.

“Wait, and you haven’t seen your family in how long?” Ray asked.

“More than half a year now,” Jonathan said.

“And haven’t talked to them, either?”

Jonathan shook his head.

“Don’t you miss them?”

“I do, but I’m not ready yet to extend an olive branch. Plus, I doubt they expect a peace offering. I don’t exclude the possibility that they believe things to be better this way.”

Ray wrapped him in another tight hug. Jonathan patted his curly head with affection. “Don’t worry about me, Ray. It feels quite liberating to be in charge for once. That’s why I can’t afford to get too involved with Maddox. Yes, I know he’s not a bad guy, but he’s, let’s face it, straight and with a record of breaking hearts. You cannot blame me for not wanting to have mine broken, as well.”

“I’m not sure about the heartbreaking part,” Ray replied. “I mean, he only had fun, the way I see it.”

“Yes, fun. And nothing’s different when he has fun with me. I definitely intend to leave it at that.”

Ray squirmed a little like there were other things he wanted to say, but in the end, he chose to remain silent. Nonetheless, Jonathan could tell that the gears inside his roommate’s head were turning. That was something that he would have to deal with later, of course, but for now, he would let it slide.

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“So, where were you and what did you do?” Maddox questioned Dex the moment his friend walked through the door.

“I had a little talk with your boyfriend,” Dex replied promptly.

“I knew it! What did you say to him?” Maddox still felt a little restless after his fight with Rusty. It was dead silent upstairs, a sign that Rusty hadn’t chosen to leave his room for one single moment. Not like Maddox was keen on bothering him since that would surely lead to other unpleasant things. He still couldn’t wrap his head around why his best bro had done something stupid like that. Kane had already assured him that he would pick Rusty’s brain apart to find out what was really in there.

“I told him to stop being a coward and pick up the phone,” Dex said, not one ounce impressed by how Maddox looked at him, with murder written all over his face.

“Only that?” Maddox narrowed his eyes.

“I also told him that he should have taught Rusty a lesson for touching him without permission, preferably with a punch to the face.”

Maddox opened his mouth to protect Jonathan but then reconsidered. Right. Jonathan had been quick to smack him in the nose when he had tried to kiss him, so how come he was so forgiving with an asshole like Rusty?

“What did he say?” he asked instead.

“He told me that you two hooked up and now you’re done,” Dex offered without as little as a blink.

“What? Done?” Maddox hadn’t expected that to hurt so suddenly, but he recoiled from Dex’s words like they were a physical blow. “We can’t be done! It has to be something you said! Jonathan likes me!”

“Are you going to stomp your foot while you’re at it?”

Maddox huffed loudly. “Why do you all think this is some kind of freaking joke? Don’t look at Kane with those all-knowing eyes! You don’t think I notice? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Buddy, chill,” Dex recommended, completely unfazed by his bout of anger. “Kane and I don’t think you’re really serious about this guy.”

Maddox’s mouth gaped like a fish’s. “What the hell?” he sputtered. “Do I need a fucking neon sign to tell you that I am really freaking serious about Jonathan?”

“You are?” Dex asked and towered over him in quite a menacing manner.

Maddox set his chin up. “Yeah, I am. And you should know me better.”

“I do know you. You’re the king of hookups. Or just because it’s so last year it doesn’t matter anymore?”

He couldn’t really argue with that, but that didn’t mean that Dex wasn’t pissing him off.

“Dex,” Kane warned, “lay off a little. Our boy here is figuring things out. He needs time.”

“I don’t need time,” Maddox bristled and turned toward Kane.

“Then what?” Kane asked and crossed his arms over his chest. “Why are you hiding if you’re sure you like Jonathan Hamilton so much, and he’s not just another hookup? Actually, you’ve never hidden your hookups.”

“Exactly!” Maddox said like that had to be the most obvious thing ever.

“So you’re treating this guy worse than a hookup,” Kane concluded.

Maddox was speechless this time. For like two beats. “Why would you think something stupid like that?”

“Because,” Dex intervened again, “there’s nothing to hide. You and Hamilton both act like there is. Are you afraid your reputation,” he said and hooked his fingers in the air to emphasize the word, “will suffer if you date a guy?”

“No!” Maddox replied fiercely. “I’m not afraid of that! I don’t care about my reputation or whatever. It’s just that Jonathan wants-” He swallowed his words. Jonathan’s secrets, whatever they were, belonged only to him.

“And you’re letting him? Why?” Dex insisted.

Maddox stopped his angry tirade again. He didn’t really have a ‘why’.

“As I thought,” Dex continued. “You didn’t care enough to find out.”

Maddox frowned and clenched his fists hard. This time, he rushed up the stairs, ignoring the possibility that he could end up knocking heads with Rusty. All his buddies were assholes, he concluded, as he walked inside his room and slammed the door behind him loud enough to peel paint downstairs.

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Why did Dex have to be right all the freaking time? It was so damned annoying! So yeah, he had been pretty much caught up with wanting to bone Jonathan, and that had left him little time to think with his other head.

Was he serious about Jonathan? Sure thing he was. Did he want to go with him on real dates and present him to people as his boyfriend? Hell yeah! Had he been nothing but a horny bastard, wanting to get Jonathan to do the horizontal cha-cha as soon as possible? Thousand times yes, and that meant that they hadn’t bothered with other stuff.

But Dex was wrong, too. Maddox wanted to know the big ‘why’, and it wasn’t his fault Jonathan was a closed book.

He searched the ceiling for answers he didn’t have. Was Jonathan playing him for a fool? The thought was a bit chilling. Sure thing, the guy had admitted to having the hots for him and badly, but that only spoke of the physical attraction between them, which was pretty much insane but couldn’t take the place of a full-fledged relationship.

Maddox groaned, rolled on his belly and buried his face in his pillow. When had things gotten so complicated for him? Before, things were so freaking simple. Except for Kane, his friends were all hooking up without even giving a thought to building a relationship. So the fact that he had wanted Jonathan so badly made him the bad guy how?

He wrapped his hands around the back of his head and pressed it down. Maybe if he suffocated himself a little, he would be able to see things more clearly.

It didn’t seem to be working.

Rusty had messed up by touching Jonathan like an idiot. Dex had messed up by forcing Jonathan to admit that he and Maddox were only hooking up. Great, now the guy thought Maddox only cared about sharing his love life with his buddies. And Kane was an asshole, too, because he thought Maddox was treating Jonathan as less than even a hookup!

He rolled onto his back and returned his eyes to the contemplation of his old friend, the ceiling. Maybe he was the biggest asshole of all, by letting himself be led around by his dick and wanting nothing than to give it to Jonathan like a freaking dog in heat.

But Jonathan, now Maddox's gears had begun to turn, was a bit of an asshole, too. Who did he think he was to believe that he knew everything about Maddox without even bothering to get to know him?

They were both totally lame at this relationship thing. That was the simple truth. Who ignores so many messages, Maddox thought with growing irritation. Last night had been great, and if he only closed his eyes, he could remember clearly how Jonathan had felt all coiled around him, hot like a freaking furnace. Their bodies weren't fools; they knew the deal. Only their owners were freaking morons.

Maddox covered his face and sighed. He had no idea what to do. He was still pissed at his buddies. They were right, but that didn't mean they were allowed to think so. Except for Rusty. He was still an uber-asshole.

And he was pissed at Jonathan, he realized, for not picking up the phone, for telling Dex they were done, for never saying anything about himself like he was some secret agent.

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Jonathan gulped nervously as he finally gathered the courage to look at the messages Maddox had been sending him all morning.

*Wakey-wakey, have you been dreaming of me? I know I dreamed of you.*

*I can barely wait to see you again.*

*You know what I'm thinking of? Hint, wipe the entire sentence except the first word.*

Jonathan couldn't hold in a small chuckle. Maddox wasn't a bad guy. No, he was a great guy, but that was all the more reason not to pull him into the mess that was his life at the moment. Not until he figured things out for himself. The wisest course of action was to postpone all that boyfriend plan until his head was a lot clearer than it was right now.

He exhaled and pressed the call button.

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Maddox eyed his phone suspiciously. He needed time to figure things out. Still, he had waited for that particular sexy asshole to call all day.

“Yeah?” he answered with an irritated scowl that Jonathan couldn’t see but maybe could sense through the phone.

“Maddox, I... look, last night was great.”

Yeah.

“And there’s a ‘but’ coming, right?” Maddox said instead.

“Right. Maybe we should stop.”

“Maybe?”

“You’re fighting your friends over me. It’s not-”

Maddox bit on his bottom lip and next should have been his tongue, but he couldn’t stop himself from saying it like it was. “Got you, Hamilton. No need to explain it. For the record, fuck you very much.”

A small pause followed. “I don’t understand why you’re so mad at me.”

“Oh, you don’t? You do. But you’re lame at this, and you know it.”

“At what?”

“Just stop pretending. Once you do that, it will all make sense.”

He ended the call with a vengeance. There, at least he wouldn’t be the only one talking to the ceiling. Until he figured everything out, that would be his one and only true friend.

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Jonathan pressed one hand over his chest. The physical pain was unexpected. It was true that he had called to end things, whatever they were, so why did he feel so devastated now? Maddox was mad. It was a completely normal reaction after having his messages ignored and his friends involved in all that drama. And Jonathan shouldn’t have cared.

Right?

No.

Wrong.

## *Chapter Twenty – What Does This Say To You?*

*Has anyone felt an earthquake during the last twenty-four hours? Please report to us immediately. Maddox Kingsley was spotted early this morning walking to class all by his lonely – and lovely – self. What could have caused the chasm between him and the rest of the Amazing Four? Can we even talk about the Amazing Four anymore? Stay tuned. You’ll learn it here first.*

Jonathan stared at Ray, completely nonplussed for a few moments. “Wait, what are they saying?” Not that he couldn’t understand it by himself, especially since he knew the details of what had happened in the lives of the Amazing Four to cause the so-called ‘chasm’.

Ray sighed and scrolled through the rest of the post. “In essence, that Maddox must have had a falling out with his close friends, for reasons that Xpress has yet to find out.”

“If there’s divinity of any kind or shape, they won’t,” Jonathan said, hoping that the anxiety in his voice wasn’t too transparent.

“They also say,” Ray continued, “that Maddox was in such a foul mood that he didn’t stop to talk to anyone and sat by himself, and I’m quoting at this point, *wrapped in a dark veil of despair and forlornness.*”

Jonathan let out a small groan as he rubbed his forehead. “So *Wuthering Heights* of them to notice such an unimaginable thing. They must be joking. There is no way Maddox--”

The words were blasted from his lips like leaves by a sudden gust of wind. Maddox was walking through the quad, yes, indeed, very much alone, none of his buddies in sight. His shoulders were hunched, he walked looking down, and the romanticism of the image painted of him by Xpress no longer appeared so far-fetched. The proverbial sunshine that seemed to trail after him, all the time, in love with the most popular boy on campus as much as everyone else, must have found a different person to crush on. The only thing missing was a tiny dark cloud raining over him.

“Ray, I need to leave you,” he said and touched his roommate’s shoulder in passing as he walked decidedly toward Maddox.

“Sure,” Ray called after him. “Fingers crossed!”

Jonathan nodded quickly, too occupied with not letting his mark out of sight to reply. He had to sprint to catch up with Maddox, as the guy appeared to pay no mind to his surroundings at all. “Hey,” he said as soon as he reached him.

Instead of a proper greeting, he got a growl instead. If that was supposed to impress him, Maddox needed to think again.

“Why didn’t you and Rusty make up already? And what about Dex and Kane?”

Another growl, this time more pointed, something along the lines of 'leave me alone'.

"I have no intention of leaving you alone," Jonathan said promptly.

Only then did Maddox stop and turn toward him. The look in the pretty grey eyes was enough to melt a heart and break it in two at the same time. Without thinking twice, Jonathan brought his hand up and caressed Maddox's cheek. "You don't need to stay mad at your friends for my sake."

To his surprise, Maddox snorted. "Not everything is about you, Hamilton."

Jonathan let his hand drop. "Did something happen to you? Something truly bad?"

Maddox huffed, grabbed Jonathan's hand and put it back on his cheek on which short stubble could be felt. Jonathan flexed his fingers slightly to take in the contour of that handsome face.

"No." The answer was accompanied by a scowl. "Only that a certain someone whose entire month as a slave to me I won fair and square decided to call it quits like a jerk. Oh, and I have no more buddies. Only the ceiling."

Maddox pointed upward and Jonathan looked for inexplicable reasons. He quickly got a hold of himself and withdrew his hand with a scoff. "Do Dex, Kane, and Rusty know that you're pulling everyone's leg with this act? Xpress already turned you into the most tragic hero of the twenty-first century."

Maddox threw his head back and sighed dramatically. "No one understands me."

Their little exchange was already garnering a few curious looks. Jonathan grabbed Maddox's hand and pulled him along. Whatever shenanigans that pretty boy was up to, others weren't supposed to witness them. Since it was for his sake that Maddox was putting on that act, Jonathan very much intended to be the sole audience.

They were behind the building under renovation once more. Jonathan pressed Maddox until his back was against the wall and then rested both palms on his chest. Maddox did nothing to stop him and just watched him with curious eyes.

Jonathan sighed and looked down. The lack of a plan became painfully obvious as the wrong choice now that he had Maddox here. "Look, Maddox, I'm--"

"You're what?" Maddox asked, and he didn't sound mad. Just eager to hear him out.

Jonathan risked one look up and locked eyes with the other. "Why do you have to be so pretty, even when you're a bit of an asshole?"

The grey eyes twinkled. "How am I the asshole? You're the asshole."

“Is that a pun about how I was the bottom?” Jonathan bit his lips hard.

Maddox pulled him close suddenly by grabbing him by the front of his shirt. “You don’t get to ask that kind of question. You’re the asshole because you didn’t punch Rusty for being an idiot, but you punched me because I tried to kiss you.”

Was that eating Maddox? “I don’t punch just anyone,” Jonathan protested. “Only special people.”

“Special how?” Maddox asked.

“Ah, dammit,” Jonathan murmured and surprised even himself by grabbing Maddox’s face, holding it in his palms and kissing him. “Special like this,” he said quickly and let go.

He was about to take a step back but Maddox pulled him hard toward him, crushing their bodies together. Their lips found purchase in another kiss, and this time it was longer and sweeter.

“What are you afraid of, Jonathan?”

The question had been asked in all seriousness, none of the playfulness or antics from before in it.

“What do you mean?” Jonathan mumbled.

Maddox’s fingers were rough, yet gentle, as they moved along his jawline. “You don’t want to be seen with me. You’re afraid of doing more than just hooking up.”

To steady himself, Jonathan wrapped his hands around Maddox’s wrists. “Maybe I’m afraid of falling for you. Ever thought of that?” He kept his eyes low so he was staring at the plump lips he had just kissed. Even that sight was enough to cause him to tremble slightly.

“That’s not the whole truth,” Maddox said stubbornly. “You’re afraid for me, not because of me only, isn’t that it?”

Jonathan nodded. “It feels like fun right now. And it is, don’t get me wrong. But are you sure you want to be labeled as gay or bisexual? People might start thinking differently about you. No, not might. They will.”

“And? That’s my problem,” Maddox said. The playful insolence was back in his voice. “And I don’t care about people.”

“You don’t? You’re popular. It’s not like you’re invisible. Whatever they start saying, it will get to you. You don’t realize it now, but maybe your friends--”

“My friends are totally okay with it.”

Jonathan had more to argue about with that. “Or your family--” he tried to continue.

“My family is uber cool. They’re the coolest people on earth.”

“Do you really want to test that?” Jonathan snapped and stared at Maddox to convince him that it wasn’t some child’s game they were playing.

Maddox’s eyebrows shot up. “You don’t get along with your folks. The work-study thing, it’s because of them, right?”

Jonathan couldn’t deny it. “Yes,” he said shortly.

“Well, I’m sure sorry to hear that. But with all due respect, Jonathan, not all families are like yours.”

“I’m well aware,” Jonathan said. “Still, there’s no way of telling--”

“Hush,” Maddox interrupting. “You’re afraid of some kind of scandal? It’s not the Middle Ages, for fuck’s sake.”

“No, it’s not. But that still doesn’t mean that once this... hormonal surge or whatever it is goes away, you won’t regret putting it out in the open.”

Maddox exhaled and chuckled as he leaned back and took a good look at him. “Hormonal surge? Are you kidding me?” He groaned and hit the back of his head against the wall. “We both suck at this.”

“Excuse me?”

Maddox made a short gesture, dangling his hand between them. “You’re a virgin, I’m the former king of hookups. We suck at relationships.”

“I was a virgin,” Jonathan protested.

That earned him a hooded look from Maddox. He could wither and blossom again under that stare, not entirely sure in which order. “Yeah, I remember.”

Jonathan was certain one could fry eggs on his cheeks at this point. He coughed and cleared his throat. “Why aren’t you talking to your friends? Please don’t tell me your best buddy is now the ceiling.”

“Well, Rusty is easy,” Maddox began. “He was an idiot, and I’m not going to forgive him.”

“He was quite drunk.”

“That’s no excuse.”

“Of course.”

“And he also took care to rub it in my face,” Maddox added.

Jonathan frowned and blinked. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Yeah. As for Dex, he shamed you into admitting that we’re only hooking up.”

“He didn’t... all right, I won’t argue for now. But what about Kane?”

“Kane is literally Dex’s wife. He’d lie for him under oath, that ass,” Maddox said promptly.

Jonathan began rubbing his forehead. “Maddox, please, I can’t have this on my conscience. You’ve been friends with these people since when? Freshman year?”

“High school, actually,” Maddox replied. He appeared to be in a much better mood now, and Jonathan felt slightly relieved. Still, his mission was to get Maddox to make up with his friends.

“That’s a long time for people our age. Please, just don’t fight with them anymore because of me.”

Maddox appeared to consider his words and rubbed his chin in thought. “If I do, what do I get?”

“What do you mean? You get your friends back.”

“But I don’t like them very much right now.”

“Are you playing with me, Maddox? Are you really?”

“Totally, not gonna deny it.”

“Ugh, I hate you.”

“Nah, you love me, but you’re too much of a coward to admit it.”

Jonathan felt an itch to punch Maddox, but he had promised himself not to give in to the same violent tendencies ever again. “So, you’re not going to bury the hatchet with your friends,” he said slowly, “until I do what?”

“Glad you finally worked that out,” Maddox said with undisguised glee and clapped his hands. “I won’t be asking much. Just that you keep your end of the bargain.”

Jonathan blinked a few times. “Bargain?”

“Are you always this forgetful or only when it’s about me? Our month. Rings a bell?”

“Oh. Wait, but what if I... I mean...” he stuttered, not wanting to repeat his fear of falling for Maddox for real.

“No ‘buts’ anymore. The only one allowed to be talked about has a double t and is part of your anatomy.”

“Aren’t you a sly bastard?” Jonathan said. “Fine. I’ll give you my word. We’ll... resume our arrangement.”

Maddox had such a satisfied smile on his face that Jonathan didn’t know whether to kiss him or punch him. Since punching was out of the question...

His internal debate was cut short by Maddox grabbing him and kissing him hard and loud.

“You ruined yesterday, so that means I get an extra day,” Maddox said.

“Fine. None of the terms changed, right?”

“Right.”

“Good. Then we are still just hooking up, and you get back together with your friends. I’d rather not go down in history as the Yoko Ono of The Amazing Four.”

Maddox chuckled. “That nickname is so stupid.”

“I know, right?” Jonathan laughed.

They stopped for a moment and looked at each other.

“All good?” Jonathan asked, his heart filling with warmth at the sight of Maddox’s perfect smile.

“No more veil of despair and all that?”

Maddox opened his arms wide and shook his shoulders as if to get rid of an invisible cape.

“None whatsoever.”

“Good. Finally, the sun can rise again over Sunny Hill,” Jonathan concluded. “God forbid we all end up in a gothic novel because of your bad moods.”

He was followed on his way out by Maddox’s wholehearted laugh.

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Now, that had worked out just swell. It could have been better, with Jonathan declaring his undying love, but Maddox still had the guy, and that mattered the most. He could work with that. On the more difficult task of getting back with his buddies, he had to put more thought into it. His friend the ceiling had proven a comforting friend during these trying times.

*Afraid of falling for me, Jonathan? We’ll have to work on your fears, ‘cause I’m totally counting on it.*

He was about to start walking when he noticed someone blocking his path. Maddox smiled. “Ray, good to see you, buddy.”

Ray, however, didn’t seem as delighted to see him. He stood in front of him, his feet apart, his arms crossed over his chest, and the stern expression on his face reminded Maddox of Dex if Dex were a cute little furry rodent.

“Maddox Kingsley,” Ray said in a voice that brooked no contradiction, “if you’re messing with my bestie, I’m going to hurt you.”

Maddox grinned and put his hands in his pockets. “All right, fair’s fair. If I ever do that, I’ll assume the position, and you can kick my butt.” Ray’s eyes grew wide. Obviously, the guy hadn’t expected an answer like that. Maddox didn’t allow him to stew in his confusion for long and grabbed him by the shoulders. “What do you say you and I hang out for a bit?”

“Um, sure,” Ray whispered like he just couldn’t believe his luck.

Maddox got that a lot, but while he had always considered himself flattered, this time he wanted to be more than just the popular guy on campus. “I really like your bestie, okay? I’m even a little crazy about him.”

“Oh,” Ray said and let himself be guided away. “I mean, I thought as much. JJ, however--”

“JJ?”

“Yeah, he’s my bestie, I can call him that. It’s roommate code,” Ray said quickly.

“All right. I’m not going to butt in. Wait, do you mean you know I’m for real?”

“Yeah,” Ray replied like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Maddox couldn’t help smiling so hard his face hurt. And his buddies thought he wasn’t serious about Jonathan, while someone like Ray, who didn’t even know him, clearly thought so.

“I mean, Hannah told me that all the girls are saying the same thing, so it has to be real,” Ray continued. “She told me it’s called feminine intuition. I’m not going to go against something like that.”

Maddox felt a bit deflated. “You know, all my buddies think I’m fooling around,” he complained.

“No way,” Ray protested as if he were face to face with Dex, Kane, and Rusty, and couldn’t believe their disbelief.

“Can I get you a coffee? I’d like to talk to you about Jonathan a little if that’s fine with you.”

“Totally. But I’m not going to divulge any secrets as per roommate code.”

“And I’m not going to ask. I just want to get to know more about him. I barely know anything.”

“Yeah, he’s secretive like that, but that’s because he got hurt and—Ah, I’m not supposed to divulge any secrets!” Ray pressed his fists against his eyes in an effort to keep himself from talking more than he should.

Maddox wasn’t learning anything new since he had an idea about the one named Asshole having hurt Jonathan in the past. But he was beyond pleased with the idea that Jonathan had a friend in someone as warm and nice as Ray. In all honesty, he would like getting to know Ray very much, too, because he seemed like a fun guy, according to both Dex and Hanna.

He patted Ray on the back. “Don’t worry, I know a little bit about the asshole. Jonathan mentioned him.”

“Asshole? Do you mean, Drew?”

Drew. So Asshole had a name. “Is that what he’s called?”

“Ah, damn,” Ray complained again, “I’m sure I wasn’t supposed to say anything!”

“I’ll still call him Asshole. It fits him.” Maddox stopped. “You know what, Ray? If you don’t want to hang out with me because you’re worried you might say something you shouldn’t, feel free to tell me. I won’t mind. I totally get it.”

Ray surprised him by grabbing his arm. “No way. I want to hang out with you so that you can tell me everything about how you’re crushing on Jonathan.”

“Oh, I can do that, totally,” Maddox confirmed, making Ray giggle.

He had a feeling that he’d have a hell of a good time with Jonathan’s roommate and bestie.

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“And he’s like a genius cook,” Ray continued his praises while sipping the sweetest beverage that had to exist on the surface of the planet.

“I know,” Maddox confirmed. “I mean, he cooks like he’s some kind of chef.”

“Right, he cooked for you,” Ray said and nodded. “Not that he told me very much about it, but I saw the ingredients. You know, I was a bit jealous. I thought he only cooked for me.”

“Ah, well, sorry, Ray of Sunshine, but it looks like you have competition. Although I must admit that I wasn’t thinking that much about the food at the time. More of tasting other things,” he added thoughtfully, while his mind wandered.

That only earned another snicker from Ray. “You’re so into him, it’s funny! And did you just give me a nickname?”

Maddox shrugged. “I guess I did. I can totally see that Jonathan is lucky to have you as his bestie. But seriously now, can you give me any tips about how I can win him over? And please don’t tell me he’s crazy about me, ‘cause that’s what my buddies are saying, yet it still doesn’t feel like it. I mean, Jonathan thinks we’re only hooking up.”

Ray took another slurping sip from his sugary drink with a thoughtful look on his face. “I really don’t think you should do anything except be yourself. You’re a good guy, which is the opposite of that Drew individual.”

“But it doesn’t look like that’s enough for Jonathan,” Maddox moaned.

“Well, then I guess you have your work cut out for you,” Ray replied. “I mean, it’s only up to you to convince JJ that he can forget about his trust issues when he’s with you.”

That completely made sense. Maddox stretched and worked at a kink in his neck – talking to the ceiling had its drawbacks when it was done for too long – and then smiled at Ray. “You know what? You’re totally right. I’m going to make it happen.”

Ray rewarded him with a big grin. “JJ won’t know what hit him, lol. You seem so determined.”

“I sure am. And I’m glad I talked to you. My buddies just don’t see how serious I am about Jonathan.”

“I do,” Ray emphasized the words. “And you two are just gorgeous together. So, you know, do your best, Maddox.”

It was good to have someone believing in his good intentions for a change. Unlike how he felt about the guys who should know him best seeming to not know him at all. He was still a bit pissed about his friends’ lack of trust in him.

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Now, since he had reached an understanding with Jonathan, he needed to get back on good terms with his friends. Even if it hurt that they didn’t believe he wanted more than a hookup for the first time in his life, he would let it slide.

He entered the house with a smile on his face and noticed right away the little arrangement on the coffee table. Were those marshmallows and grapefruit juice?

“Hey,” Dex said promptly.

“Maddox,” Kane added in the most apologetic manner possible.

“Hey to you two, too. What’s this?” Maddox asked.

“Your favorite combination,” Kane offered.

“Yeah, when we were in ninth grade,” Maddox said but didn’t really mind.

Dex took him by the shoulders and made him sit on the sofa. Kane dutifully flanked him from the other side.

“Why does this feel like an intervention?” Maddox asked. “I’m not giving up on Jonathan,” he added quickly.

“And we’re not asking you to do that,” Dex assured him. “After talking it over with Kane, we both realized we haven’t been fair to you.”

“You’re a good friend, and we haven’t been that,” Kane added. “I remember how you took Louise and her mom to the hospital when I was at my grandparents and couldn’t come because of the snow.”

“And how you stood in line an entire night for me to get the latest console when I had training the next day, even though you didn’t care for gaming much,” Dex added.

“And every year on her birthday you bring my mother flowers--” Kane started.

Maddox put both hands up. “Got it, guys. I’m the best friend of the year and I accept this prize.” He made a half-formal bow and then grabbed a marshmallow and bit into it with gusto. Then he grimaced a little. “I might have outgrown this sweet stuff, but thanks for the effort. And in case you’re worried, I’m not mad at you anymore because Jonathan told me to stop being mad at you.”

Dex and Kane exchanged a knowing look.

Maddox sighed. “Gosh, are you sure you two aren’t going to get married soon? What’s the look all about?”

Dex patted his shoulder. “Kane, you’re right, after all. Maddox is in deep. I stand corrected.”

“Yeah, so stop having doubts,” Maddox said.

“We just did,” Dex said matter-of-factly. “So, what’s the strategy, lover boy? Jonathan Hamilton is a slippery one. It looks to me like the guy has some serious hang-ups, so please treat him with extra care.”

“I’d say that Maddox should be himself and tell Jonathan directly what he feels,” Kane intervened.

“What am I hearing? Are you two disagreeing? Is this a cold day in hell?”

Dex smacked him playfully upside the head. “We’re not disagreeing, joker. We complete each other.”

“I totally see that.” Maddox countered with a well-aimed punch to the side that Dex took with a grunt.

“Well, we sure are happy you’re no longer mad at us, but you still have someone to make peace with. Did Jonathan include him in this little arrangement of yours?”

“He did,” Maddox said with a sour face. “But his is a criminal offense, while yours were just misdemeanors.”

“Rusty’s still the same guy,” Kane argued. “Just go talk to him. You’re too good friends to fight like this.”

“Are you sure he shouldn’t be the one to take the first step?”

Kane bumped against his knee. “Come on, Maddox, don’t let pride get in the way, okay?”

“Well, since you’re begging me so nicely, I’ll talk to him. But guys, maybe you should find someone else to give these marshmallows to, because I think I’m getting a bit green in the face.”

“Duly noted,” Kane said with a smile.

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He had no idea how to start or what to say, especially since he hadn’t been the one in the wrong to begin with. However, he had an inkling that Rusty might not feel good about their falling out, and Maddox knew his friend like no one else did. No matter how much of a smiley face he put on every day, Rusty felt things more than others, and he hurt a lot deeper as well.

What was he doing, pitying him like that? Rusty was still an asshole for touching Jonathan like that.

He knocked on Rusty’s door, his head still empty of solutions on how to talk to his buddy.

“Yeah,” Rusty’s call came from behind the door.

Maddox took it as an invitation to come in. He wasn’t surprised to see Rusty with a gloomy look on his face. “Yo,” he said. “Thought I’d come up and talk to you.”

Rusty pouted and looked away. He lay on his bed and appeared to be in the same clothes as yesterday. Maddox had heard Rusty hadn’t even gone to classes today.

“What about?”

Maddox walked over to the bed and hovered. “Look at me, asshole. You owe me an apology.”

Rusty pursed his lips more. “Sorry.”

“You gotta do better than that. Why the hell did you jump Jonathan’s bones like that?”

“Hey, I didn’t jump his bones,” Rusty protested. “I just wanted to know if he was serious about you.”

“And how was that supposed to work? I mean, you could’ve just asked him.”

Rusty gave him a long thoughtful look. “If he had punched me, I would have known he just liked punching any guy. There’s nothing more honest than that.”

Maddox groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose. Of course, it had to be something like that with Rusty. “I don’t even know where to start with you sometimes.”

Rusty finally changed his position and pushed himself up on his ass. He rested his elbows against his knees and let his hands hang between them. Maddox sat on the bed and rubbed Rusty’s back. Somehow, it felt like his friend was the one in need of some comforting.

“What’s going on, Rusty?”

Rusty shrugged. “I don’t know. It feels like you’re not my best friend anymore.”

“I’m too absorbed with this guy? Is that it? Because I’m crushing on him?”

Rusty shook his head. “No. It’s because he’s a guy. A chick is a chick. It’s different. But a guy like that could become your best friend, too. And replace me.”

Maddox groaned. “Seriously? You can’t think that. Jonathan can’t replace you. You’re you. C’mon, Rusty Parker, you’re irreplaceable.”

Finally, Rusty turned toward him and offered his signature grin. “For real? I’m still your best bud?”

“Always,” Maddox replied. “Still, you need to apologize.”

Rusty threw his arms around him and held him tightly. “I’m sorry I touched your boyfriend’s butt. Just for the record, I didn’t grab it or anything, I mean, I don’t know if it’s round or square, or soft or muscly, that kind of thing.”

Maddox laughed. “Good. I don’t want you addicted to Jonathan’s ass, too. But you’ll have to apologize to him.”

“Fair’s fair,” Rusty admitted. “Consider it done.”

A comfortable silence fell over them like a blanket. Maddox liked that about Rusty, liked how they could be themselves without talking and filling the space between them with words, and not for one moment feeling self-conscious about it.

Still, now that he was paying attention, Rusty felt a bit more restless than usual. Ever since junior year had started, they hadn't had a proper conversation, not one that went more than skin deep.

"Have you talked to your dad lately?" Maddox asked.

Rusty let out a noncommittal grunt that could be interpreted as pretty much anything.

"It's still on, spending Thanksgiving break at his place?"

"Yeah, still on," Rusty replied softly.

During the second year of high school, Rusty's folks had had a divorce. An ugly divorce, Maddox's mom had whispered while talking to his dad. Maddox didn't know all the details, but it looked like Rusty's father had led a double life for a while, building a second family in a different town. In the end, he had chosen them. Maddox knew that Rusty had never forgiven his dad for it, for leaving him and his mom, a fragile woman who still seemed to have a hard time unwrapping herself from that betrayal.

"You know if you choose to come home with me, mom's always happy to have you over."

Rusty offered him a lopsided grin. "I might eat all the pie again."

Maddox slapped him playfully. "She'll be ready this time. Just say the word."

"I'm good," Rusty said with confidence. "And I still want your mom to love me."

"Are you kidding? She's crazy about you. I should be the jealous one. You're basically trying to steal my mom."

"Better her than your man?" Rusty asked, his mouth widened by a teasing smile.

Maddox pretended to strangle him, and Rusty made choking sounds for the sake of fooling around.

"Just go and tell him that you're sorry for being an ass."

"Will Jonathan forgive me?" Rusty asked, his eyes hooded.

No one ever, in the entire campus, would say Rusty was shy. He was the opposite of that, with his brash attitude and big mouth. But Maddox knew that wasn't the whole truth, the whole Rusty.

"Yeah, he will. He basically begged me to make up with you."

Rusty's eyes sparkled. "He did?"

"Yeah. So do your part, 'kay?"

"Sure. I'm going right now."

Maddox didn't stop him. Rusty was abrupt like that. But these compulsions made him who he was, with the good and the bad.

"Just don't reach for his ass again, okay?" Maddox shouted after him.

"No worries, I'm over that," Rusty threw over his shoulder as he walked out.

Maddox narrowed his eyes for a moment, his mind ripe with a new question, but Rusty was already gone. Could it really be that Rusty liked Jonathan's ass, for real? Nah, he was the current king of hookups. Straight as an arrow hookups.

Maddox didn't want that title anymore and for a good reason. He very much intended to become the king of Jonathan hookups. Yeah, he was Jonathan-sexual now.

## *Chapter Twenty-One - The Part Of Me That Wants You*

Conflicting emotions tended to be exhausting, so for the sake of keeping his stamina up, Jonathan lied to himself that, for the time being, it would just be better to play along with Maddox's plan. Would a month be enough to get over it? He had the answer to that, not that he liked it, but he was too weak to resist. On the upside, he would get plenty of experience, which meant that he would walk into a real relationship, fully knowing what being together with a guy sexually was all about.

Yes, spending time with Maddox, hot and sweaty between the sheets, had a practical purpose. And wasn't he the one who wished to change? It was a test of his resolve at the same time. If he fell for Maddox it would be his own fault, and he would deal with it.

Sure, there were downsides to giving in to attraction, such as the need for long showers in the company of his hand. Jonathan snorted at his own inability to get Maddox out of his mind, as he walked out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist.

"You have a visitor," Ray announced.

Jonathan smiled. Having Maddox over so soon was more than he had hoped for.

"It's Rusty," Ray added.

Jonathan's smile froze.

"I let him into your room while you were in the shower. I hope you don't mind," Ray added. His voice dropped. "He looked like he wanted to walk into the bathroom to talk to you, but that would have been a bit weird, right?"

Jonathan sighed. "No problem, Ray. I'll deal with him."

Why was Rusty there? Could it be that he and Maddox were still mad at each other? Maddox had a reason, at least. Half a reason. Ten percent of a reason? Jonathan walked into his room, unprepared for what Rusty wanted to tell him.

The guy was sprawled on the bed, his long legs hanging over the edge. He straightened up as soon as Jonathan opened the door.

"I came to say sorry," Rusty said directly, letting his forearms rest on his thighs, bending forward. He looked up at Jonathan, holding his head cocked to one side.

Jonathan had a very disturbing crush on Rhett Butler at a very young age, and although he had worked that out of his system, the way Rusty was staring upward at him like that reminded him of Rhett shamelessly eyeing Scarlett from the foot of the staircase. He shook away the image; he

tended to be overdramatic sometimes, and while Rusty had some roguish charm going for him, his goofy smile had nothing to do with being an attractive movie icon.

Still, Jonathan grabbed the towel where it twisted to keep itself in place in a self-conscious manner. “All right,” he said in a cool voice. “Consider it forgotten.”

Rusty’s smile grew broader. “What do you have to hide under that?” he asked.

Could it be that this brazen attitude got Rusty what he wanted? Jonathan was about to pull backward defensively when he remembered his conversation with Dex. Rusty was a challenger by definition. He needed some putting in place. So, instead of pulling the towel tightly around himself, Jonathan lifted it, grabbed his balls and cock and flaunted them for a moment.

“Was that what you wanted to see, Rusty?”

He let the towel fall back and then crossed his arms over his chest, staring Rusty down, and feeling pretty smug.

Rusty’s eyes were wide in shock and his lips formed an excited O. “Nice,” he commented. “Again, do it again.”

Jonathan snorted. “Nope, this is all you’re getting. Aren’t you supposed to be past the phase when you’re curious about other boys’ junk?”

“Aren’t you?” Rusty shot back, and his eyes twinkled.

Jonathan looked down and shook his head with mirth. “Touché,” he admitted.

“Touché,” Rusty mimicked and laughed.

There was something infectious about Rusty and his good mood. Jonathan could totally see why he had no problem whatsoever getting girls. He chuckled, as well.

“So, do you forgive me?” Rusty asked in the same frank way that appeared to define him.

“Sure. All good?” Jonathan felt the need to ask. He truly didn’t want Maddox to be on not speaking terms with his best friend. He offered Rusty his hand after the guy stood from the bed.

“Ew,” Rusty pulled away, “you just had your hand on your balls.”

“I just took a shower,” Jonathan protested and then wiped his palm over Rusty’s shoulder, making the other snicker hysterically.

“You’re nasty, Hamilton,” Rusty said.

“Maybe I am.”

Jonathan was surprised when Rusty pulled him into a hug. “Be nice to Maddox. Or even nasty a little, if that’s what he likes. Just don’t hurt him and stuff. Unless he really wants you to.”

Jonathan patted Rusty on the back. “I have no intention of doing that.”

Unlike the hug Maddox had given him that time, triggering a chain of events that brought them to where they were right now, this one didn’t give Jonathan any unfamiliar jolt or the well-known shock of desire. These guys appeared to like hugging a lot. Rusty released him and, for a moment, they stared at each other.

“Can you tell me why you did that, though?” Jonathan asked.

Rusty’s shoulders rose and fell, followed by a sigh. “I was drunk, but that’s not it. Maddox is into you big time. And he’s my friend.”

Jonathan didn’t pretend to understand what Rusty was trying to get at. “And?” he asked, more and more curious.

Rusty rubbed the back of his neck and seemed uncomfortable for a moment. “I wanted you to punch me so that I could get into a fight with you.”

“Oh,” Jonathan managed. “Why?”

The mischievous green eyes bore into his. “Can I ask you something, Jonathan?” The rogue seemed serious for a change.

“Sure.”

“Don’t steal my buddy, ‘kay? I mean date him, fuck him, whatever, but let him still be my best friend.”

Jonathan didn’t know how to unpack that. Was that it? Rusty thought he would steal Maddox as his best friend? “I wouldn’t even know how to do that,” he replied in all honesty.

“Good.” Rusty smiled again. “Cause I won’t forgive you if you do. I’ll come back for that punch and that fight if it happens.”

Jonathan saw Rusty to the door without another word. What was it with these boys and their insecurities? And he thought he was a hot mess.

“See you around, Hamilton,” Rusty said.

Jonathan was about to close the door when Rusty pivoted on his heels and faced him from up close. “What now?” he asked, only slightly unnerved by the invasion of his personal space. Slightly, because he was starting to get used to Rusty and his strangeness.

“You’re really pretty. No wonder Maddox likes you. And that’s some top quality junk down there. Just saying.” The last words came with an all-knowing smirk.

Jonathan groaned, rolled his eyes, and gave Rusty a firm shove. “All right, thanks for the compliment. But take this piece of advice with you, straight boy. Don’t go around, staring at other guys’ junk. That might not be too wise.”

Rusty gave him a solid thumbs-up and walked down the corridor, laughing. Jonathan shook his head in disbelief. Maddox’s friends were truly an interesting bunch.

The thing was, he thought, as he returned to his room, that a certain something needed correction. Maddox hadn’t ever been in his room, while Dex and Rusty had already visited him. Today, Jonathan felt courageous, and on top of everything, to prove that he was in control, he needed to start acting like it.

And he would call, not text. At the second ring, Maddox answered. “Yes?” he drawled.

Only he could throw lewd insinuations into a single word. Jonathan felt his cheeks getting hot and his earlier courage dissolving into a puddle of disappointment in himself at his feet. “Um, Rusty was here. He apologized.”

“Yeah, I know,” Maddox said.

“So, you’re cool with him now, right?”

“Only if you forgave him.”

“I did.”

“Then I’m cool,” Maddox replied and laughed softly. “Rusty’s not a bad guy.”

“I believe you.” Jonathan licked his lips. His throat was suddenly dry, yet his palms were sweaty. He squeezed his eyes shut. If he did it fast, he wouldn’t have to overthink it. “Would you like to come over?”

“Like to your dorm?” Maddox sounded slightly surprised.

“Yes, I think that’s what ‘over’ covers.”

“Aren’t you studying?”

“Not right now,” Jonathan said quickly. For some reason, he was holding his breath, so he needed to get out as many words as he could until he lost consciousness or something stupid like that. “But if you’re busy--”

“Guess what? My schedule just cleared,” Maddox replied just as fast.

“Good.”

“Good.”

“I’m coming.”

“Happy to hear it.”

“I’ll say it again. And again. Once I’m with you.”

“Oh.”

“I’ll be there soon.”

“Okay, bye.”

“Bye.”

Jonathan threw the phone on the bed and clasped his hands. He had done it, placed a freaking booty call to the sexiest boy on campus. Obviously, he was out of his mind, but those were details, and he wouldn’t bother with them at the moment. Maddox was clear about his intentions. Was his ass even able...? Jonathan touched his backside gingerly. All right, so he hadn’t thought this through. Was there a rule about how long you were supposed to wait for another romp in the hay after losing your anal virginity?

He ran his hands over his face. It wasn’t like him to be so rash. But he had invited Maddox over, and that meant that he had to suck it up. It wasn’t Maddox’s fault that Jonathan had extended such an overt invitation. They were hooking up, that had been a booty call, hence Jonathan’s ass was up for a—

He didn’t dare to think further than that. A cursory look around the room convinced him that there was nothing he could do to make it look more orderly. But how would he go about protecting his ass after getting Maddox’s hopes up like that? Maybe he would offer multiple blowjobs, he thought, as he began to dry his hair.

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Nothing made him happier than having Jonathan initiate a hot meetup for a change. So far, the guy had played it cool, even while admitting he had it bad for Maddox, which meant that whatever was happening right now was a total win. Just thinking of those beautiful lips stretched over his—

All right, he needed to keep it in his pants until he got there.

“Where are you going in such a hurry?” Kane asked as he jumped down the stairs two at a time.

“To Jonathan’s.”

“Should we order dinner for you, too?”

“Nah, don’t bother. I’m sleeping over,” Maddox replied, convinced that it was exactly how things would happen. In case Jonathan kicked him out, he would sleep on the doormat and scratch at the door while mewling forlornly. He knew it would work from the many cat videos he’d seen in his life. Jonathan would have no choice but to take him back to bed.

Superb plan. He was known for those. As soon as he was outside the house, after a hurried bye to Kane, he willed himself to walk instead of run. It took a lot of his willpower to do so, but he needed to focus on preserving his stamina if he wanted to play with Jonathan for as long as his dick demanded.

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“Hi, Ray of sunshine,” he said as soon as Jonathan’s roommate opened the door.

Ray beamed at him. “His room is over there.” He leaned forward and gave Maddox a conspiratorial wink. “I have really good headphones, noise cancelling and all that. So consider I’m not even here.”

Maddox grinned. “Good to know. You’re a great roommate.”

“Great roommate is my middle name... names?”

“Whatever you say, buddy,” Maddox said and moved quickly past Ray to reach Jonathan’s door. He couldn’t slow down if it cost him everything.

After a short knock, he let himself in. Jonathan was completely naked and in the middle of the room, looking a bit confused.

“Wow!” Maddox walked over to him and grabbed him by the waist. “I guess any misunderstandings must be out of the way.”

“Ugh, yeah, I don’t know,” Jonathan said, and their lips connected. “You’re to blame.”

“What for?” Maddox asked as he brushed his lips along Jonathan’s mouth.

“I was thinking of you and forgot to get dressed.”

“No problem. The way I see it, you saved us some precious moments.” Maddox didn’t hesitate and pushed Jonathan toward the bed.

It was narrower than his, but it would do in a pinch, he decided as he aligned his entire body with Jonathan’s leaner frame. He would never forget how well they fit together. Maddox could feel a

thrumming sensation under his fingertips everywhere he touched. Suddenly, he no longer wanted to hurry and let one hand wander over Jonathan's chest while enjoying the scent of some expensive body wash which the guy must have used recently.

The rise and fall that came with Jonathan's breathing made his drop in synch, as well. So eager to find release, his dick in too much overdrive, Maddox realized that he had never taken the time so far to explore Jonathan from up close.

"Um, what's happening?" Jonathan's voice was anxious with unhidden want.

"What do you mean?" Maddox asked while he brushed his knuckles along the other's firm jawline.

"I thought you'd jump me the moment you were inside my room."

Maddox let out a short chuckle. "Did you?"

"Yeah, that's basically your MO. Our MO."

"At least you're not placing all the blame on me."

"How could I?" Jonathan ran one hand through Maddox's hair, pushing it away from his eyes. "I'm totally nuts about your sexy body."

Maddox pouted. "Am I nothing but a sexual object to you?"

Jonathan laughed, pleased with the teasing he seemed to be in charge of. "I'd say this is a booty call, so, yeah, maybe I do that, as wrong as it might be."

Maddox took in the amber eyes, the straight nose, the lips curved in an unrestrained smile. "I've never had anyone like you."

Shadows drifted over the beautiful eyes. "A guy?"

"I don't mean that. What I mean is that..." Maddox hesitated for a moment, searching for the right words because he had never done such a thing before, "you're deep, there's something in your eyes that makes me feel full like I'm about to choke if I don't touch you, and when you smile, everything's real."

Jonathan's face morphed into a softer version, and a new twinkle appeared in his eyes. "Wow, I had no idea you could wax poetic."

"You're making me do the unthinkable."

"I do?"

“Yes.” Maddox shifted a little and let his forehead rest against Jonathan’s head. This way, they couldn’t stare at each other, but they would be even more intimate if that were possible. “I want to touch you so much, and yet not to touch you at the same time.”

“Oh.” The single syllable dropped, and with it, Maddox could tell Jonathan’s insecurity was rearing its head.

“Don’t be so disappointed. The part of me that wants you always wins.”

He took Jonathan’s lips between his, teasing them slowly. Wandering hands traveled down his back, reaching for the hem of his t-shirt and pushing it up. They rested on his skin, soft like feathers. Maddox could feel Jonathan’s desire to touch him, just as great as his.

When had he ever felt like this? Sex was pleasure, it was about getting it right and then some, and, of course, about coming. But this, this was different. Maddox wished they could stay like this for a while, how long he didn’t know exactly, but wanted this to last.

Jonathan gasped as Maddox went for the side of his neck and began to bite him playfully, but with soaring desire. Yes, everything this guy did or let out of him, the slightest grunt, felt like lovemaking.

Maddox had a sudden urge to taste more, feel more. Their mouths came together like two halves of a whole, and the flavor of longing he found there overtook him. Yeah, Jonathan was right. He wasn’t the type to wax poetic, but ever since they had met, he was no longer himself completely, or maybe he was just more than he had ever been.

“I love your kisses,” Jonathan breathed out once they pulled apart.

“I love your mouth,” Maddox replied and brushed his thumb over Jonathan’s bottom lip, full and swollen now, redder than before and moist from all the kissing.

Jonathan bit on said lip, probably unconsciously, not knowing that he was provoking Maddox to bite it, too, devour it until its owner begged to be spared.

“You’re too dressed,” Jonathan said suddenly.

“Yeah, clearly.” Maddox straightened up and shed his t-shirt. Beneath him, Jonathan was staring, his eyes shining, while taking in the scene in front of him. Maddox knew he was a bit vain, but none of the appreciation he’d ever gotten before compared to what he could read now in Jonathan’s eyes.

Too bad he had to move away to remove his jeans, but Jonathan surprised him by pushing him on his back and helping him out of the rest of his clothes with determination. Maddox gasped as their roles were reversed, and now it was Jonathan on top, kissing him hungrily.

Their cocks touched, and it felt so incredibly teasing that Maddox would swear he got goose bumps everywhere. Could it be that Jonathan wanted to be on top for a change? Maddox sensed his pulse quickening. Not that he hadn't fantasized about it before, but maybe he needed a bit of mental preparation first.

He was slightly disappointed when Jonathan went down on him. His disappointment didn't last long since a warm mouth was all around his cock, swallowing it like it was nothing.

"Fuck, you're so good," Maddox whispered as Jonathan took him deep and fast. A blowjob was a good way to take the edge off, for sure. Then, without a doubt, Jonathan would start getting real about topping him.

He didn't stop to think about it since the sensations in his cock and balls were too intense for that. Jonathan was playing with his balls while taking him down his throat like an expert, and it felt like his life depended on getting all the juice out of them.

Maddox couldn't last long, not after that day and all his dreaming of that gorgeous mouth doing such amazing things to him. "Oh, fuck, take it, babe," he whispered and gripped the coverlet, using all his willpower not to lift his hips off the bed and choke Jonathan.

He crashed so hard after that. He could barely breathe and his chest felt full. Jonathan released his cock slowly from his mouth but he continued to lick it gently and pepper his balls and thighs with tiny kisses.

Jonathan surely loved his body, and if Maddox had anything to do with it, he would love a lot more about him. For now, it was something to work with.

"Kiss me," he ordered.

Jonathan raised his head and stared at him. "I just sucked you off."

"And? How's that a problem? Come here."

The other obeyed, but with a small annoyed huff.

"Don't worry," Maddox said, "my cock's all yours. You can do whatever you want with it."

"Big words," Jonathan replied and chuckled.

"I just want to kiss you," Maddox insisted, and soon, the lips he enjoyed so much were over his, making him taste cum and desire. "Fuck, you're turning me into a sex addict."

"How am I doing that? And weren't you the king of hookups already?" Jonathan protested.

"Yeah, but it feels like I only used to eat bread 'cause I was plain hungry, and now I'm having the most delicious cake in the universe and I cannot get enough."

“You’re such a player,” Jonathan said and laughed. “No wonder everyone thinks you’re it.”

“I mean it,” Maddox insisted and frowned a little.

Jonathan pressed his fingers against the crease in his forehead, smoothing it out slowly. “It’s all right. I think exactly the same.”

Maddox wanted to tell him that it wasn’t like that, Jonathan wasn’t just one of many, but the words resting on the tip of his tongue eager to get out had to be stopped. Actions were stronger than words, and he didn’t like being ignored in his efforts to prove his true intentions. So he turned the tables on Jonathan, catching him underneath his chin and biting his neck hard. Then, ignoring the other’s soft pleas, he moved downward, biting and kissing the firm pecs, stopping only for a moment to tease the cute belly button. With one last lick of his lips, he dove in and took Jonathan’s cock in his mouth.

There was something rewarding about hearing the other’s breath hitch, his gasps and moans, while his cock grew harder and harder. Maddox felt it against the roof of his mouth but didn’t care. He used a lot of tongue since he was no deepthroater and teased the head and underside until Jonathan became so vocal that Maddox worried that Ray’s noise cancelling headphones might not prove strong enough. At the same time, Jonathan’s hands were in his hair, pulling hard at it. Even that felt arousing and Maddox had to push his cock into the bed to calm it down.

He pulled away. “Give me a facial,” he ordered.

The amber eyes grew wide in disbelief.

“Come on,” he goaded, “all over my face,” as he pumped the other’s cock harder and harder.

Jonathan groaned and threw his head back. Maddox barely had time to close his eyes, as the first rope of cum hit him.

He laughed when it was over and licked his lips. His eyes were still closed, so he yelped when a warm tongue came down on his closed right eyelid.

“Damn, you’re such a fine shooter,” he commended while Jonathan licked his face like an eager dog.

“And you’re crazy,” a gruff voice replied.

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They lay on his narrow bed, glued together at the shoulder. Jonathan loved how warm and solid Maddox’s body felt so close to his, the sound of his breathing, and the scent of his skin. Their hands linked together like it was the most natural thing in the world.

“You didn’t have dinner, did you?” Jonathan asked, to fill the silence. If it went on for too long, he might end up saying crazy things, so it was better to settle for the mundane.

“Nope.”

“I’ll make something for the three of us. Oh, gawd, do you think Ray heard us?” he asked, suddenly alarmed.

“He told me about his awesome headphones.”

Jonathan blushed. Maddox and Ray talked about such things like they were completely normal. Was he the only one who felt embarrassed?

“I’ll help,” Maddox said and caressed the inside of his palm with his rough fingers.

“In the kitchen? I don’t need it,” Jonathan replied.

“Doesn’t matter. I’ll come watch you.”

“You could just chill in my room.”

“Yeah, but I might end up humping your pillow because it smells like you,” Maddox said promptly. “Are you sure you want to sleep on a pillow covered with cum?”

Jonathan wasn’t sure he would mind that at all, but instead he said, “Okay, no. But I warn you, our kitchen is really small.”

“I’ll try to sit in a corner and not bother you. Are you going to cook naked?”

Jonathan snorted, barely keeping in a laugh. “I have a roommate.”

“Right. Put some clothes on, now.”

Maddox began to push him out of the bed.

“Whoa, whoa, I’m doing it,” he protested.

Being self-conscious more often than not was normal for him, but it was different being watched by Maddox while he put on a t-shirt and a pair of sweatpants.

“I had no idea reverse striptease could be so hot.”

He stared at his guest. Maddox was biting his lips, his eyelids dropped half-way, one hand on his half-hard cock. “You’re something,” he mumbled, not knowing how to take that new teasing.

“And come on, you need to dress, too. I hope you don’t intend to eat naked.”

“Why not?” Maddox challenged him. “Ray is a totally cool guy. And I feel awesome in my own skin.”

“Seriously? So you can be naked around my roommate, but I cannot?”

“I’m jealous, you’re not. That’s the difference,” Maddox said matter-of-factly.

“You got Hanna and Ray together. What reason could you still have to be jealous of him still?”

“It’s not about Ray. It’s about everyone. I’m the only one who’s supposed to see you naked.”

“Ah, then you might not like to hear that I practically showed Rusty my cock and balls,” Jonathan said promptly. The last thing he needed was to have any more misunderstandings.

“You did what?” Maddox jumped out of the bed.

“Don’t fret so much. I wanted to shock him a little since he believes he’s the only one who can do that.”

Maddox crowded him, pushing him against the wall. “Jonathan Hamilton, are you secretly an exhibitionist?” His pretty eyes were twinkling.

“No, but I told you. I wanted to give Rusty a little of his own medicine.”

“Did it work?”

“Maybe, I’m not completely sure.”

“How much did he see?”

“As I said, the whole thing.”

“What? Like your ass, too?”

“No,” Jonathan protested. So maybe, just maybe, it hadn’t been wise to let Maddox know about this, and now he was clearly being made fun of. “I just flaunted my junk for like a second to put him in place.”

“A second only? Are you sure?”

“Maybe two seconds? I don’t know. Wait, you’re not getting jealous of Rusty, too, are you?”

“I’m jealous of everyone who breathes the same air as you.”

“You’re either nuts, or you enjoy making fun of me.”

Maddox got closer and closer, until Jonathan was plastered against the wall and their noses touched. The situation was a bit unnerving, until Maddox started laughing. “I bet he pissed his pants,” he said.

“I don’t think so, but I did shock him a little. He might have changed his opinion of me.”

Maddox made a sudden move and bit his nose.

“Ouch! What was that for?”

“You’re not allowed to flaunt your junk in front of anyone.”

“For real? It’s my junk.” Jonathan grunted as Maddox grabbed his crotch and squeezed. It wasn’t at all unpleasant, but he really needed to start cooking, or they would be forced to have a very late dinner.

“No, it’s not,” Maddox countered. “And this is yours.” He took Jonathan’s hand and placed it over his cock.

Jonathan wrapped his fingers around Maddox’s manhood, filling his hand with it. “Sounds like a fair deal,” he whispered.

Maddox kissed him slowly. “I sure hope so. I’m starving, though. We could always order in. You don’t have to slave in the kitchen.”

Jonathan snorted. “People so mistakenly think it’s hard work, but it’s not. And I like it.”

“Then if it’s so great, you’ll let me help?” Maddox asked.

The only thing missing was a wagging tail.

“Sure, I’ll find something for you to do,” he promised.

“Good. Let’s go.”

“Hey, aren’t you forgetting something? Get dressed,” Jonathan ordered.

Maddox pushed himself away and began dressing, making a show out of it. Jonathan closed his eyes for a moment.

“Can I sleep here tonight?”

The question caught him off-guard. “Sure, if you want.”

They wouldn’t get a lot of sleep, obviously, but Jonathan wasn’t willing to send Maddox back to his place for the world. Their month together was bound to fly by too quickly, so making the most out of it was the best course of action.

“I want. I just need to know, do you?”

Jonathan took Maddox by the shoulders and kissed him, short and sweet, on the lips. “Without a doubt.”

The gorgeous smile he got for that was the only reward that mattered.

## *Chapter Twenty-Two – Is This Really A Booty Call?*

The kitchen definitely felt a lot smaller with the two of them in it, and Jonathan realized quickly that he would have a hard time focusing on cooking, no matter how skilled he was at it. Not because Maddox was so damned sexy, but because he had such a focused expression on his face while cutting an onion that Jonathan worried he might burst into laughter at any moment.

“Like this,” he explained and because of lack of space, he positioned himself behind Maddox and showed him with his hands.

“Cooking is fucking sexy,” Maddox said and pressed against Jonathan’s chest, making him shudder with sudden pleasure. “I’ll cook everything myself if you stay like this and rub against me.”

“I’d say that’s the recipe for not getting anything done, actually.” Jonathan moved away. If they stood so close they risked combusting.

“Ah, I think I cut myself,” Maddox complained, and Jonathan hurriedly turned back to him in alarm.

“Where?”

Maddox snickered and showed him his middle finger. Jonathan took revenge by biting on it, not too hard, but enough to make a point. His unruly guest began to pant exaggeratedly, forcing him to release the finger.

“Stop being a joker if you want us to eat tonight.”

“All right, all right. I didn’t peg you for a biter, though.”

“What? Did you think you were the only one?” Jonathan rubbed the side of his neck. Tomorrow, he would have to opt for a high collar. It was a good thing that the weather was getting chilly and he could easily wear a turtleneck. Without any need to check, he was pretty certain Maddox had given him a hickey.

Maddox grinned and pushed the tip of his tongue through his teeth, just to show him how naughty he could get. “I also like to lick and suck a lot.”

Jonathan rolled his eyes. His cheeks would hurt from smiling and laughing so much while in Maddox’s presence. He turned to his work, shaking his head.

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Who said he couldn’t be domestic if he wanted? And boy, he wanted it so much, now that he had a chance to spend time with Jonathan and do things together. Maddox examined his host from the corner of one eye. That precious smile had never left his lips since Maddox had teased him

earlier. A sense of pride made his chest swell. Only he could do that. All right, so maybe, just maybe, there were other situations in which Jonathan smiled like that, but none that he knew of. He would watch him like a hawk and notice if the guy offered his genuine smiles just as easily to other people.

Ray walked in and smacked his lips at that very moment. “Ah, it smells so good. JJ, Hanna is about to drop by. Do you think she can have dinner with us? It’s okay if you two want to spend time by yourselves. We can always go out.”

“Nonsense,” Jonathan replied. “All I have to do is bring an extra plate to the table.”

He turned toward his roommate and gave him a fond smile. Yes, that smile was different. Maddox wanted to go round and round the small table for a victory dance, but the place was really tiny. He might cause a disaster if he did that.

Someone knocked on the door, so Ray turned on his heels at the speed of light. “That’s her. Thank you, JJ!”

“So, you have no problem with Hanna knowing?” Maddox asked. Jonathan wanted them to maintain the status quo about their month together. Secrecy appeared to be still high on the list.

“Well, she’s Ray’s girlfriend and apparently the owner of a frightening thing called female intuition. She already knows. Does that bother you?”

Maddox shrugged. “Not at all.” Hell, he’d scream it from the top of his lungs that he’d landed a dude like Jonathan, but they were still doing that play-pretend where all they were doing was hooking up and nothing else. Like hookups meant sleepovers and cooking together.

However, Maddox was willing to indulge his prey since Jonathan was so skittish. As time passed, he would corner him slowly until there was no room to run.

Hanna walked in and kissed Jonathan on both cheeks. Then she turned toward Maddox with an all-knowing smile. Like that wasn’t enough, she winked at him. “Howdy, stranger,” she drawled.

“Who’s a stranger?” He opened his arms and Hanna hugged him briefly.

“Well, not to me, but the word on campus is that you’re taken.”

“Then it must be true,” Maddox said promptly.

He tried to catch Jonathan’s eye as he said that but there was no chance of that. All he could see was a turned back while their obliging host slash cook filled the plates.

“Ah, we only have three chairs in here,” Ray said like he had just realized that. “Hanna will have to sit in my lap.”

That was pretty shrewd of him. “No way, Jonathan will sit in my lap,” Maddox said right away.

“No need for any of that. I’ll go bring an extra chair from my room,” Jonathan said.

Maddox deflated, but he was pleased to see that Ray was just as disappointed as he was. Hanna laughed and hugged her boyfriend tightly. “If you keep acting like that, Maddox might end up thinking that I’m holding you at arm’s length or something.”

“I just want to hold you in my lap while we’re eating, is all,” Ray argued. “We haven’t done that, yet.”

Maddox observed the two lovebirds with increasing warmth. So, he had played the part of matchmaker well after all.

“Let’s just be civilized when there are other people present,” Hanna recommended and smooched him loudly, probably to ease his disappointment.

Jonathan was back with the chair, and Hanna sat on it while thanking him. Maddox couldn’t tear his eyes away from his so-called hookup. He was just so well-mannered, like he was from a different movie, but Maddox loved that to pieces about him.

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“So, is Maddox behaving?” Hanna asked in a conspiratorial whisper as she helped him with the dishes after dinner.

“Are you asking me if he’s a good boy?” Jonathan whispered back and smiled.

Hanna threw a surreptitious look over her shoulder. Maddox and Ray were engaged in a debate over some sci-fi movie that Jonathan hadn’t watched yet.

“I don’t think I need an answer to that, though,” Hanna continued. “It’s clear as day that the mighty Mad Dawg is totally smitten.”

“It’s not like that,” Jonathan argued. “Wait, do you know why he’s called that?”

“Mad Dawg?”

“Yes.”

Hanna pondered for a moment. “Now that I think about it, I don’t. I’ve always supposed that it’s nothing but a crazy nickname with an equally crazy story behind it.”

“Crazy like in illegal fights?”

Hanna chortled. “Nah, no way. Maddox would not hurt a fly.”

He had punched his best friend, according to Dex, and not so long ago, but Jonathan didn't have the heart to contradict her.

"How are things with Ray?" Jonathan asked politely. While he had eyes and could clearly see that the two lovebirds couldn't live one without the other, he needed to steer the conversation away from him and Maddox. Right now, he needed at least ten hours by himself to cool down, slow the beating of his heart and try to make sense of all that was happening. The thing was, they were doing this booty call thing, and that meant he wouldn't have any time for introspection and clarification of feelings and the sensations that threatened to take him over completely. A simple look at Maddox made his throat dry and his palms sweaty even now, after getting so intimate with each other.

"Ray is an awesome guy. I'm happy," Hanna said directly. Then she poked him gently in the shoulder. "The question is: what's keeping you from feeling the same?"

"I'm happy with Ray, too," Jonathan joked.

That earned him a small huff from her. "You two don't need to sneak around. I mean, I respect your decision, but no one would think anything bad. Well, if they did, tough luck for them."

"It's a bit complicated," Jonathan started.

Hanna placed a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. "You don't have to justify yourself to me. And sorry for being pushy. I just think that you have all the right in the world to feel and be happy with Maddox."

"Don't worry, you're not pushy. Ray has made me immune to that kind of thing," Jonathan replied.

"What are you two conspiring about there?" Maddox asked out loud, making their hushed conversation stop.

"I was just asking Jonathan something about cooking," Hanna said airily and then winked at Jonathan, all the while making sure that her gesture had been noticed. "Keep him on his toes," she whispered, again, loud enough for Maddox and Ray to hear it.

"Hey, whose side are you on, Hanna?" Maddox protested. "What's this keeping me on my toes thing?"

Hanna offered him an innocent look and a small gasp of surprise like she had just been judged unfairly. "How do you know we weren't talking about someone else?"

Maddox rolled his eyes, said something under his breath, and got to his feet. "You see, Hanna, that's why boys don't like you. You're a bit too sneaky and shrewd."

“One does,” Hanna chirped happily. “All the others don’t matter.” She plopped down on Ray’s lap and kissed him loudly on the cheek.

Jonathan took Maddox’s hand. “Let’s go to the bedroom,” he said hastily. He didn’t want Maddox to pump up the charm and force who knew what truths out of Hanna.

“Let’s,” Maddox replied and wrapped one arm around his waist. “Nighty-night, nerds,” he addressed Ray and Hanna while pulling Jonathan along, like he could barely wait to be out of there.

It was funny when he suggested walking a foot Maddox was immediately willing to walk a mile.

Not that it took them that long to reach the bedroom.

Or kiss again, as soon as they were inside.

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Hanna and Jonathan couldn’t fool him. Maddox was pretty sure the girl had a good opinion of him, but right now, he felt a bit unsure. What could she possibly have told Jonathan about him? Hopefully, only good things, although now he felt the need to take a long critical look at himself and identify all his faults so he could eliminate them and become the perfect man for Jonathan.

Because, sure as hell, Jonathan was the perfect guy for him. He loved pressing against the other and humping against him while pushing him against the door. Jonathan let out the sweetest whimpers, clearly fighting the need to moan out loud for fear of being heard by the other two people in the suite.

“What did Hanna tell you about me?” Maddox questioned.

Jonathan looked away. “Nothing.”

That sounded so guilty, it made Maddox want to rush out of the room and ask Hanna again. “C’mon,” he pleaded, “I saw you two exchanging glances like there was something going on. Whatever she told you, it’s not true.”

The amber eyes flickered with amusement as they settled on him. “Oh, all right.”

Maddox narrowed his. “Wait, you’re agreeing way too fast. Does that mean that she said something nice about me?”

Jonathan blinked lazily, and Maddox could swear the guy was checking out his lips and thinking of something funny. “Nice, maybe.”

“C’mon, Hamilton, you’re not the kind to play,” Maddox insisted. He caressed Jonathan’s neck, running his fingers along the perfect jawline that begged to be peppered with kisses. Such

distracting thoughts had to be kept at bay, at least for a bit, until he squeezed out whatever dubious information Jonathan had on his person, courtesy of Hanna's meddling.

"I know, only lately, a certain bad boy has been challenging me to play with him," Jonathan replied.

Maddox could detect that the other was swallowing with some difficulty. It had to be because of their proximity, and how their crotches touched in this position. Jonathan was leaning against the door slightly, so their midsections were at the same level. Plus, the sweatpants proved to be no armor between them, which meant that he could perfectly feel that unmistakable hardness pressing against his cock. They began to move, albeit still needing to have that conversation, and his cock hardened considerably.

"Who's a bad boy?" he asked. Wow, his voice sounded different, deeper and rougher. Only Jonathan had that effect on him, and no one else. "I'm totally a good boy if you kiss me and tell me the truth."

Jonathan angled his head just right and allowed their lips to connect slowly. He kept saying he loved Maddox's kisses, but he was one hell of a kisser himself.

"Wow," Maddox pulled back, "you really know how to use that wicked tongue, Hamilton." He might still be joking, but the warmth invading his chest and the things happening south of his belt were a bit too much to handle. "Now, come on, spit it. What did Hanna tell you about me that you're not willing to share? The rumors aren't true, just for the record. I've never been in a threesome--"

"Threesome? Such as in with a man and a woman?" Jonathan questioned.

Maddox scowled. "With two girls, and that was just something Xpress pulled out of their butts. And you know I haven't had a guy before you. Stop trying to derail me."

Jonathan laughed softly. "I don't recall ever hearing a guy protesting so much against his prowess in bedroom affairs being highly praised."

"I don't have that kind of prowess," Maddox shot back.

Jonathan caressed his cheek slowly. "I wouldn't share you, Maddox, but as far as your prowess is concerned, I think it keeps poking me in the crotch with too much purpose to ignore it for long."

"Then don't ignore it," Maddox suggested.

Jonathan smiled and began to drop to his knees, but Maddox stopped him. He was crazy to say 'no' to a blowjob right now, but he wanted Jonathan more where he was, eye-level with him, talking. He couldn't get enough of looking at that handsome face. Not that he had never noticed

good-looking dudes, but this was different. Jonathan was the only one he wanted to look at, his eyes all misty and wanting, his lips parted and asking, and his entire body turned into a hot furnace, ready to welcome him.

Jonathan blushed. “You don’t want me to take care of that?”

All that insecurity, rushing in. Maddox was dying to know more about it. No, not more, everything. That was the only way he’d be able to blast it out of Jonathan’s mind forever. He surprised even himself as he took Jonathan’s hands, brought them to his lips and kissed the knuckles. “I totally want you to, but I’m not here just to play the role of a horny dog.”

The amber eyes hooded with a new kind of desire. “What else are you here for?” Hope, restrained and unwilling, shone through those words.

“I’m here to hear you talking,” Maddox said.

Jonathan laughed softly. “Talking? What about?”

“Anything. I want to know you,” Maddox replied and pulled Jonathan toward the bed. “Although I don’t mind if we do that naked.”

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Maddox was a skillful assailant, finding all his vulnerable spots and poking at them. As long as it was simply a booty call, and they were just hooking up, all was fine. He was supposed to walk into this knowing that was all it was. But no, Maddox wanted more, and Jonathan wanted it, too; the sole problem was that one of them was afraid of that kind of intimacy, while the other wasn’t.

Such were the privileges those who had never been hurt could enjoy. Still, he allowed Maddox to get him out of his clothes and undress himself, too, then sneak under the blanket and face each other while lying on one side.

“Is this really a booty call?” he asked, his voice a bit lost. “Truth be told, I have no experience with such a thing, so forgive my lack of knowledge of the protocol,” he said, attempting to lighten the mood by making a small joke.

Maddox’s gaze was so intense that it forced him to close his eyes only so that his soul could shield itself from what it meant.

“You’re doing great so far,” Maddox praised him. “Jonathan,” he began, and his voice was serious, “why do you hate straight boys?”

Jonathan opened his eyes. “I don’t hate straight boys. I just don’t want to get involved with them.”

“But you’re getting involved with me,” Maddox insisted. “Why?”

“Do you really have to ask that? I can name a thousand reasons.”

“Such as?” There was a challenge there, and it felt as if they hadn’t been dry humping only minutes earlier, against the bedroom door, with two other people only feet away from them on the other side.

Jonathan breathed deeply. Then he moved one hand and began to trace Maddox’s features with the tips of his fingers. “You’re beautiful, funny, intelligent. You make me want you with just a look.”

“You make it sound like I’m fooling you somehow,” Maddox said and pouted.

Jonathan couldn’t help but kiss him. “You’re not, or if you are, I’m a willing victim, knowing all too well what it means.”

“What does it mean?” Maddox asked.

*To have my heart broken once you move on.* He chose not to say the words out loud. “It means that I might actually like straight boys a bit too much. And that I tend to ignore my brain, since other parts of me choose something else.”

“Wow, I’ve never heard someone rationalizing sex thoughts like that.”

Rationalizing, right. Yes, he was trying to do exactly that. Not that he could fool Maddox so easily. Maybe an abbreviated version of the truth was needed. Maddox was too precious to be left confused.

“That straight guy--” he started after a brief moment of hesitation.

“The asshole,” Maddox hurried to confirm.

Jonathan laughed. “His name is Drew.”

“Asshole,” Maddox said again, matter-of-factly.

“Well, he was the biggest mistake of my life to date,” Jonathan said in one go.

“Hmm. How so?”

He took one deep breath. “Something bad happened, and he chose to blame everything on me.”

“Were you to blame?”

“Of trusting him, yes.”

“Were drugs involved? I remember you jumping ten feet in the air when I approached you in the cafeteria that first day like I was about to ply you with cocaine and hookers.”

“Only drugs, not women,” Jonathan hurried to correct him. “Yes, it was because of my past experiences. Please, forgive me. I was too strung out at the time.”

A smirk came as a reply. “You look quite strung out to me right now.” Maddox reached for his crotch under the blanket, and Jonathan grunted.

“Thing is,” he said hurriedly, decided to say it quickly, “he betrayed my trust and not only. I became a joke. To everyone.”

“Because of the drugs?”

“No,” Jonathan replied. “Because I was sucking his cock.” He hoped that the vulgarity of that statement would prevent Maddox from asking more questions.

However, his temporary bed partner didn’t appear in the least phased by it. “Let me get this straight. He wasn’t sucking your cock?”

“No. It was perfectly, utterly one-sided. I had to wake up to the realization that a straight guy used me for blowjobs and then blamed it all on me when he got caught with drugs. I suddenly became vice incarnate in everyone’s eyes.” He stopped, unwilling to revisit all that shame again.

“Good thing you got away from him,” Maddox said promptly. “And this ‘everyone’ you’re talking about. I’m not Drew, Jonathan, okay?”

He nodded. He knew as much. So why wasn’t he letting go already? Why was he so afraid? Maybe the exposure had been the most shocking, his very soul turned inside out and stripped bare before everyone and their sneers, like dirty laundry. That had hurt in ways he had yet to learn how to deal with.

“So,” Maddox continued, “just so you know. We’ll take it easy. For the record, just so you know, I’m not happy that we’re a secret, but I get you. You need time to get to know me and, trust me, you’ll get to know me whether you like it or not.”

“Is this the part where I start shaking in my boots?” Jonathan joked, trying to play it cool.

“No.” Maddox leaned in. “This is the part where we stop talking and pick it up from where we left off.”

Jonathan was fine with that. Yes, he was totally fine with that, he thought as Maddox kissed him sweetly.

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So, it hadn’t been an unreciprocated fling, but something more serious than that. Maddox wanted to learn the whole truth, only so that he could ease Jonathan’s worries, but he would not press more than necessary. Being so close to Jonathan, he had noticed right away how his face had

become paler as he recalled those trying times, and how his beautiful eyes had filled with shadows. Healing took time, as he well knew from what his mom had told him.

Now, his job was easy for the moment. The least he could do was to make Jonathan feel good. And that was why, when he kissed him this time, he didn't make it about sex. Instead of reaching for the goodies, as was his modus operandi, he kissed Jonathan long and slowly while cupping his face.

However, it looked like someone else had a different strategy in mind for forgetting about bad things. Maddox gasped when a naughty tongue snuck inside his mouth, and an equally naughty hand reached for his cock.

“Do you want to be on top?” he asked raggedly.

Jonathan hesitated for a moment. “Um, sure.”

Oh, wow, that had been simple. Maddox lay on his back, asking the ceiling for a moment if he was ready and getting the confirmation he needed. He heard Jonathan shuffling about and smiled. Then he closed his eyes, waiting for those elegant hands on him to open him up. Surely, Jonathan would take it easy since—

Maddox grunted as one of those skillful hands began to rub along his shaft. Maybe Jonathan wanted to help him take the edge off so that he was more relaxed by the time they got to penetration.

“Is there something wrong?” Jonathan asked in an unsure voice.

“Nope. This feels totally fine.”

Maddox spread his legs slightly as he heard Jonathan opening what had to be the lube bottle. He waited with bated breath for the guy to start working his hole. He didn't dare open his eyes; he'd do it later when Jonathan was already inside him, giving him a proper dicking.

Wait, what if he hated it? No, he wouldn't hate it; it would be Jonathan doing the dicking, and the guy was a smooth lover when it came to everything. He wouldn't be hasty with something as big as that.

Jonathan's smooth hand returned to his neglected dick. So, Maddox had a sensitive cock, especially when he was this close to the sexiest guy on the planet, but he didn't need lube just for a little handjob.

Wait, handjob? His eyes snapped open only to witness Jonathan straddling him with grace and pushing down on his length with a soft moan.

“Ah,” he managed.

Jonathan looked at him, his eyes unsure once more. Maddox exhaled as his cock was gripped by fiery heat. Oh, fuck, this was good.

“Is this position weird or anything?” Jonathan asked.

Maddox shook his head. “No, you’re on top,” he said matter-of-factly.

“I am,” Jonathan confirmed with a small smile, but it was like there was a question mark in there, somewhere. “Are you sure you like it?”

Well, the die was cast. Maddox pushed himself up on one elbow so that he could reach Jonathan and grab him by the back of the neck. “Totally. Fuck me like you mean it,” he ordered.

That appeared to give Jonathan a much-needed confidence boost because his sexy ass began to move, squeezing and rubbing Maddox’s cock so well. Maddox pulled Jonathan to him as he lay back, but without letting go. His now free hand moved to grab hold of that fantastic ass.

“All that twerking is really paying off,” he whispered. “Fuck, you’re a good fucker, Jonathan.”

“I thought ‘fucker’ was supposed to be an insult, not praise,” Jonathan breathed out.

His skin was starting to develop that thin sheen of sweat, and his scent was maddening. Maddox began to lick his neck, getting lost in the sensations. He understood now what some people said about just wanting to eat someone whole. That was what he felt right now. He wanted to bite Jonathan, to lick him everywhere, to devour him completely. His mouth moved frantically all over the exposed throat and then lower, rushing at one nipple, then the other, before settling in the manly cleavage, subtle but strong, separating the two perfect pecs.

“Maddox,” Jonathan whispered, “you’re killing me.”

“Don’t talk, give me your mouth again,” Maddox ordered. The last thing he needed was to hear Jonathan’s sexy voice. He was so close to coming that it felt totally embarrassing.

He wasn’t thinking right, obviously, because Jonathan’s tongue in his mouth felt like perfect sexing. He sucked on it with a vengeance and tried to adjust his position so that he could postpone shooting too fast.

Jonathan took it as a sign that he was trying to reach deeper because he moved his body, too, at what seemed like an impossible angle and began slamming against Maddox’s groin with everything he had.

“Motherfucker,” Maddox hissed and squeezed his eyes tightly shut. “I’m coming, I’m fucking coming!”

Jonathan slammed down on him one more time, hard, and his entire body shook. Thank fuck for small mercies, Maddox thought as he collapsed on his back, groaning. At least Jonathan was coming, too, and that meant that he wasn't a complete asshole.

Jonathan moved on top of him, kissing his face and shivering still. Between them, there was nothing but sweat and cum, but Maddox wanted it to act like some kind of glue that would keep them together forever.

He wrapped his arms around Jonathan to make sure that he couldn't get away. He shuddered as Jonathan's ass squeezed his cock one more time before letting it out. Warm cum was landing all over his crotch, pouring out of that awesome behind. To make sure at least some remained inside, he hurried to seal the entrance with his fingers.

"Maddox," Jonathan whispered. "I'm too sensitive."

"I'm just holding my hand there, don't worry," he whispered back. "I just like the thought of something of mine still being inside you."

Jonathan snickered, although he sounded quite wasted. "You know that sounded pretty weird."

"No, it didn't," Maddox countered. "Stay here, with me, just a little longer."

Jonathan obeyed without protesting.

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He could have told Maddox that maybe it was a bit too soon for his ass to get reacquainted with that weapon of mass destruction the guy carried between his legs, but he was in it because he was obviously insane, so what mattered another craziness? His ass didn't protest too much, and he had actually been the one to ride Maddox like a crazy cowboy at an even crazier rodeo.

But it had felt empowering, he thought as he kissed Maddox lazily. For once, he was in control, and knowing that he could drive someone so amazing all out of his mind with only the movement of his hips was a wondrous thing in itself.

For a moment, while he had watched Maddox smiling, his eyes closed, and waiting for him to get on top, he had had the funniest idea that maybe the other was waiting for him to top in a different way. But no, that had to be a mistaken assumption. While Maddox didn't seem to dislike having some fingers around the area, an entire cock was most certainly a different thing.

Good thing he hadn't just assumed such a thing and had gotten on top, filling his ass with Maddox's cock. After their conversation, most probably Maddox, being the good guy that he was, thought of helping him experience how it felt to be the one in control.

And it had felt amazing, no matter if his ass was on fire right now. Maddox finally allowed him to drop to one side. Jonathan played with the sweaty hair on the other's chest, loving how even that little movement of his fingers made Maddox let out small sounds of pleasure.

"Thank you, Maddox, that was really great," he said and kissed his cheek one more time.

"The pleasure was all mine," Maddox replied and burst into laughter. "Seriously, I don't think I've ever been with anyone who thanked me for the sex."

"What? Really? I can't believe that."

"Believe it. Damn, I didn't even do the work, and now I'm done for."

"Let's wash, and then I promise I'll let you sleep," Jonathan promised.

"Promise not to run away like the first time?" Maddox mumbled, while his pretty eyes were closing.

"Hey, don't fall asleep on me like this. And where would I run away to? We're at my place."

"Ah, right, good, good. Then we're only going to meet here from now on so that you cannot run."

Jonathan laughed and ran one hand through Maddox's hair. He was screwed, and he wasn't thinking only of his ass. He was simply that because he had just welcomed his doom into his bed.

Ah, well, he'd think of how to deal with that tomorrow. Tonight, he'd entertain the idea that Maddox Kingsley, the hottest guy on campus and in the entire world, was his.

### ***Chapter Twenty-Three – Now Is Always The Perfect Time***

*Gather round, boys and girls! We're opening today with the sauciest piece of news we've had to offer our dear audience here at Sunny Hill in years. Can you guess who just snatched the title of the hottest minx on campus? We bet our sacred anonymity that you cannot. But let's get straight to the facts, shall we?*

*Hanna Milton, while never one to make our headlines or anyone else's for that matter, finally decided to shed that cloak of respectability she pretends to throw over her shoulders each time she walks into a party.*

*Did you know that officially, she's Ray Franklin's girlfriend? We didn't until recently because, let's face it, who's Ray Franklin? We won't keep you in suspense. Ray Franklin is none other than the transfer student sharing humble quarters with our gay heartthrob Jonathan Hamilton. Otherwise, moving on.*

*Apparently, the girlfriend thing is nothing but an act, or else, why would she be seen walking together with Maddox Kingsley? Ladies and gents, the secret is revealed! Hanna Milton is Maddox Kingsley's secret crush, the one we have been wondering about for weeks now!*

*But wait, how does poor Ray Franklin fit into all this? Well, when she walked out with Maddox Kingsley this morning, she did so from her so-called boyfriend's dorm. Wow, clearly, she's not two-timing, but one-timing with the two guys in her life knowing about each other.*

*Should we let you put two and two together? Yes, we will. Yet, there's one question remaining...*

*What was Jonathan Hamilton doing the whole time an orgy took place only two feet away from his bedroom?*

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Jonathan was the unfortunate owner of an extra sense when it came to being the center of gossip, so the strange looks and giggles poorly hidden behind palms acting as shields made his hackles rise first thing in the morning. Could it be that someone had finally put two and two together, and his affair with Maddox was out in the open? They hadn't been the most careful they could have been, without a doubt, and that was about to cost them dearly.

Despite his dread, the situation required that he know exactly what all those students throwing meaningful glances in his direction thought they knew about him and Maddox. He pulled his phone from his jacket; if everyone was in on the joke, there had to be only one source that must have fueled the gossip fire so early in the day.

He blinked as he began reading, and by the end of that awful text, the blood had drained completely from his head, making him feel lightheaded. Without hesitation, he pocketed his

phone and started running, ignoring the even stranger looks now aimed at him like homing missiles.

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Maddox would have broken his usual stride into a little dance, and the only thing keeping him from doing that was that his bones felt like jelly after a night spent in Jonathan's narrow bed. If he closed his eyes, he would see that handsome face close to his and taste those sweet lips like they were still kissing.

Too bad they had to keep it a secret. What he needed was to daydream less and come up with a sophisticated plan to wrap Jonathan around him and the other way around so that they would finally walk through the quad, hand in hand, like boyfriends. The plan had to take into account Jonathan's complex sensibilities, which meant that the head-on approach alone wasn't enough.

First, he needed to talk to someone more mature than he was about stuff like that. There was always the possibility the right approach was to blurt out that he wanted Jonathan as his boyfriend, but his hot pursuit so far might scare the guy away if he went about it like that.

Yes, he needed to consider the matter as carefully—

“So, what's so great about her?”

Maddox almost bumped into someone, as far away from the rest of the world as he was. He stared at the girl blocking his path. She looked slightly familiar, with her platinum blond hair – dyed, obviously – and that pout that was supposed to make men fall at her feet. Had he hooked up with her before? The ‘maybe’ that followed in his mind was pretty strong. “Her?” he asked slowly, only then descending abruptly with both feet to the ground.

Was he in a prank video? As he muttered that single word, all breathing beings in a half mile radius or something stopped and stared at him. Students of all colors of the rainbow, who should have been on their way about their day, preoccupied with whatever class they had first, or conversations they were engaged in with their friends, crushes, old relationships, budding relationships, mid-terms, the list could go on forever... Well, everyone froze and turned their heads toward him, some at impossible angles, waiting for something.

“Yeah, her,” the girl said impatiently, drawing his attention back to her.

The world around them still didn't move. Time stop magic, Maddox thought and smiled. That was funny; he would share it with Jonathan later. *Hmm, do you know I have super powers, babe? Oh, really, like what? I can stop time. I don't believe you. I'll make you believe me, just watch.*

He must have gone a little too far into his own head while daydreaming of his next conversation with Jonathan, because the girl impatiently tapped her foot. “Hanna Milton,” she hissed. “What does she have that the rest of us don't?”

Hanna? What was this chick going on about? “Um,” Maddox pondered, “I don’t know. She’s pretty smart.” It wasn’t as if Hanna was the smartest girl on campus, but she applied herself in her studies, and Maddox had a hunch what the chick in front of him meant by ‘the rest of us’.

The look of perfect disbelief on that too well made-up face was priceless, and it made Maddox grin. Clearly, that was a shocker. “Do you like smart girls, now?”

Hmm, that sounded like a trick question. And what Maddox really, really liked right now was...

...running toward him across the quad, looking perfectly discomposd in a fashionable turtleneck and dress pants that stretched over his lean thighs while he rushed through the clumps of students, trying to elegantly dodge everyone in his path.

“Maddox,” Jonathan said breathlessly as he stopped right in front of him, “I need to talk to you.”

“Hey, we were having a conversation,” the girl protested.

Maddox waved at her impatiently. “Just wait a little,” he told her in a more domineering voice than he usually used in all his interactions. Jonathan wanted to talk to him, and that was enough to make the rest of the world disappear. Ha, now that was also a cool super power.

Jonathan pulled him aside, all the while throwing panicked looks around. No one else budged.

“I’m so sorry, Maddox, I know that it’s unexpected and completely not right, but I need you to kiss me,” Jonathan whispered under his breath.

Maddox started to smile, but the guilty look in Jonathan’s eyes made him stop. “What, like right now? In front of all these people?”

Jonathan nodded and blushed crimson red. “It’s for a good reason, trust me.” He shoved his phone into Maddox’s face and waited.

Oh, shoot. Now that was... Maddox didn’t waste time processing more than necessary. He grabbed Jonathan and turned him, tango-style, holding him in that position for a couple of moments, as he took in the flushed face, the trembling lips, and the beautiful eyes hooded with hard to hide desire. Everyone around gasped. “Now’s the perfect time, then,” he said and brought his mouth to Jonathan’s, putting his soul in it.

The next moment, the entire quad erupted. Maddox didn’t have to open his eyes to know that there were dozens of phones, maybe hundreds, aimed at them at that very moment, recording their kiss for all eternity. That was good. He would have it documented for when the grandkids wanted to learn about one of the most exciting moments in his life.

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*We interrupt your daily schedule with some very interesting developments, Sunny Hill! True gentlemen still exist! We repeat, true gentlemen still exist! Why else would Jonathan Hamilton hurry to defend Hanna Milton's reputation by convincing the hottest guy in our campus's history to give him a very public kiss? Obviously, we have the answer.*

*He wants to throw us off the scent of what's really going on with Hanna Milton and her complicated love affairs. He even went as far as to walk hand in hand with Maddox Kingsley as if they were boyfriends as he was heading over to class.*

*Like we would fall for such a trick... Thank you, Jonathan Hamilton, for proving to us that men like you still exist, but we've been around the block quite a few times and we're not so easy to deceive.*

*As for you, Maddox Kingsley, what could you possibly think you would accomplish with a stunt like that? That we won't continue to keep a close eye on Hanna Milton's future string of conquests? She's obviously now our resident Dame aux Camélias, and we won't let this modern courtesan slip through our fingers.*

*You walked hand in hand with Jonathan Hamilton today, throwing loving glances at him, like you think we'd be that easy to fool... Are you even aware of what you're doing? Your reputation as the very much straight king of hookups might not survive this.*

*Maddox, Maddox, Maddox... you're playing with fire (but certainly not with Jonathan Hamilton as you'd have us believe).*

Jonathan ran one hand over his eyes and groaned. What could it possibly take to convince these people that Hanna was innocent? And they had been so quick to publish a new piece – courtesy of today's fast channels of communication – only to slander Hanna more, and also Maddox in the process. His plan had backfired all right, proving to him once again how inadequately equipped he was to deal with scandals and whatnot. He had acted on impulse and now had only managed to throw Maddox in hot water, and that without saving Hanna. That should teach him not to be so rash ever again.

He had yet to see Ray and, hopefully, his roommate wasn't too shaken by that ugly gossip. Seeing how Ray enjoyed reading Sunny Hill Xpress a bit too much, perhaps his favorite guilty pleasure, he would surely be heartbroken over it.

He drew a deep breath and walked into the lecture hall. Ray waved with a beaming smile and gestured for him to take a seat by his side. Jonathan cast his eyes down and forced himself to ignore the snickers and glances running around the room. Why did he have to be the center of attention, the one thing he would have very much loved to do without? Obviously, because he had kissed the hottest boy on campus in front of everyone. That should have been an easy guess, he thought, throwing as much sarcasm at himself as he was capable of.

“So,” Ray whispered slyly, “you kissed Maddox, huh?” He showed Jonathan his phone and played the half a minute movie clip that had been instantaneously uploaded by Xpress to their site.

“Technically, he kissed me,” Jonathan whispered back. “But, Ray, aren’t you mad? Or upset?”

“Because you kissed... I mean, because Maddox kissed you?” Ray asked, a bit confused.

“No, because of the other... things,” Jonathan struggled to find his words.

“For their talking shit about Hanna, you mean?” Ray asked again.

“And you,” Jonathan pointed out.

Ray shrugged. “Hanna had a good laugh. I talked to her about it. And look,” he said with a smirk and gestured around, “I’m a celebrity now.”

Jonathan buried his face in his hands. “Why aren’t you pissed? Like, at all? I mean, they said all those mean things--”

Ray stopped him by placing a sympathetic hand on his forearm. “Why does it matter? We know the truth, Hanna, you, Maddox, and I. Ten years from now, we’ll look back and think how we made the headlines in the gossip columns. And have a good laugh, obviously. By then, we might be married, have kids, and all that. So, why should I be mad now?”

Jonathan moved his hands away and stared at his roommate. There was concern in Ray’s eyes, but it was directed at him. “You have a very healthy outlook on life, Ray,” he said truthfully. “I envy you.” If only he could be like that. “Are you sure Hanna is not upset? They wrote all those horrible things about her.”

“She’ll drop by this evening, and you can ask her directly if you don’t believe me.”

“I do believe you, it’s just--” How could he explain the ravaging consequences of unfair exposure to people who seemed impervious to them?

The professor walking in, interrupted them and his train of thought both. If he focused on the lecture, he’d have no time to relive the bad times in his head, and that was all that mattered for the moment.

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Jonathan slowed down as he noticed Connor, who seemed very much intent on talking to him. “Hi, Connor,” he said first.

Connor leaned against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest, all the while giving Jonathan a slow once-over like he was seeing him for the first time in his life. “So,” he eventually said, after pointedly ignoring Jonathan’s greeting, “you and Maddox, is that for real?”

“Yes,” Jonathan replied promptly, “very much... for real.”

Connor shook his head and let out a small huff of disappointment. “I truly thought we were getting somewhere. You know, that you liked me a little.”

Jonathan adjusted the strap of the bag slung over his shoulder in an effort to keep himself steady. “I did,” he said hesitantly, “but I don’t think... that we had that spark, you know?” He swallowed thickly and waited for Connor to speak. The guy was in love with his own theatrics, and despite feeling guilty about giving him false hopes, Jonathan couldn’t stop thinking that Connor was just trying to play him at the moment.

“That’s too bad, Jonathan. Because I thought we had it,” Connor let the last words drop and walked away, not too fast, but not too slowly, either, as if he was expecting Jonathan to rush after him.

Himself from the past would have done that, but his eyes were gradually opening to the realities around him, such as the fact that starring in Xpress and being slandered was not that big a deal. The disappointment of a self-absorbed prick like Connor was nothing, compared to everything else.

And maybe it was for the better for him to burn that bridge in particular. Jonathan couldn’t see himself with Connor any more than he had before, not after Maddox, but that wasn’t the only reason. He squared his shoulders; he deserved better than to walk in someone’s shadow, like a trained puppy.

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“Hi, my dudes,” Maddox said cheerfully as he walked through the door to the house he shared with his buddies.

Dex stared at him and grinned. “Wipe that smile off your face, lover boy,” he warned.

Maddox shrugged. “You first. What do you have to grin about, anyway?”

“You know, I don’t usually read Xpress, but when I do...” Dex’s grin broadened as he raised his phone and shook it. “That was an Oscar moment. Right, Kane?”

His other buddy walked in, with a beer in his hand. “Totally.”

“Hey, hey, I wasn’t acting,” Maddox said defensively. Could it be that his buddies still believed he was just playing around, with no serious intentions about Jonathan?

“You put your soul into it, that’s true,” Kane said. “So, Jonathan needed just a little nudge, didn’t he?”

Maddox sighed. Maybe, just maybe, he was a bit piqued about things happening only because Jonathan didn’t want Hanna and Ray to get hurt, but still, he was a man who lived with outcomes. And the outcome, in this case, was pretty awesome. “Well, he’s not the type to let a thing like that slide. Of course, he doesn’t think he did enough, because he keeps on blowing up my phone with ‘I’m sorry’ messages.”

“What does he have to be sorry for?” Kane handed him the open beer and went to get himself another.

Maddox took a sip and pondered. “He thinks he ruined my reputation or something. Well, if that means that we’re officially boyfriends now, I don’t care.”

“What happened to him that he’s so horrified by what a piece of garbage like Xpress yaps about?”

Maddox shook his head slowly and grimaced. “I cannot tell you, guys. He’s confided in me some, but it’s a secret.”

Kane nodded thoughtfully. “We respect that. It’s good that he’s opening himself up to you, though.”

“Opening? Like in the missionary position?”

Of course, the party pooper was there. Maddox turned toward Rusty who was coming down the stairs, his hair a mess, and a glassy look in his eyes announcing that he mustn’t have been up to any good things lately.

“How do you manage to get so fucked up so early in the day?” Maddox asked and glared at his bestie.

Rusty shrugged and stretched a lazy arm to Kane. “Get me a beer.”

Kane grunted. “Get it yourself.”

“You got one for Maddox,” Rusty complained.

“And? Maybe I love him more,” Kane countered.

Hmm, someone was a little pissed at the resident kinkster, but why? Besides the usual, obviously.

Rusty snorted and went to the fridge himself. Maddox exchanged a short look with Kane, and the pursed lips and dissatisfied expression in his friend's eyes told him what he needed to know. Rusty was partying a bit too much lately, enough for it to be considered a problem.

"So, tell me more about the opening," Rusty said nonchalantly as he opened his beer.

"You're only thinking of kinky stuff," Maddox accused. "Anyhow, what's up with you?" he asked directly.

Rusty shrugged and leaned against the wall, probably because he was too tired to stand. "Ever since you've been officially dethroned, my popularity skyrocketed."

"And by that, he means that stranger and stranger women have become pilgrims to the shrine of Rusty," Dex said and pointed up.

"Maybe you should slow down, or there won't be any more women left," Kane said.

"Why are you all dogpiling on me?" Rusty asked and cradled the beer to his chest.

Direct approaches didn't always work on Rusty, and Maddox knew better. He took advantage of a moment when the guy wasn't looking at them and made a discreet gesture at Kane and Dex. "How about skipping those strange women and hang out with your favorite person in the world this evening?" Maddox asked.

Rusty looked at him, eyes at half-mast, like he was trying to process what he was being told. "Are you finally setting me up with a cat boy?"

Dex and Kane grunted in disbelief and in unison.

Maddox kept his cool. There was no one else who knew Rusty better than he did. "No, you beautiful asshole. That would be me. I'm your favorite person in the world, and don't you forget that."

"I'll drink to that," Rusty said and raised his beer. "Hey, and all the best, for real, to you and Jonathan. When's the wedding?"

Dex and Kane, the traitors, snickered.

"We're in for a long courtship first," Maddox replied brightly. "Thanks, assholes," he addressed the other two.

"What?" Dex drawled. "You two make a wonderful couple. Oscar material," he added and waved his phone again.

Maddox groaned exaggeratedly and began walking up the stairs. "Take a shower and brush your hair, Rusty. I'm not taking you out if you look like a hobo, 'kay?"

“kay,” Rusty shouted after him.

Maddox knew he'd do it. Rusty wasn't as rebellious and stubborn as people believed if one knew how to talk to him. And he was the one who knew, which meant that he had a responsibility.

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Jonathan was deep in reading when a knock on the door interrupted his studying. “Come in,” he called loudly. He knew Maddox was taking Rusty out tonight, so it couldn't be him. “Oh, hi, Hanna,” he said when he saw who it was.

The girl stopped in the doorway and offered him a look full of compassion. “Ray told me what you've been going through.”

“Um,” Jonathan stood and invited her to take a seat, “shouldn't that be my line?”

Hanna sat on the offered chair and continued to look at him like he was made of glass. “You put yourself out there today, and I'm thankful, but just so you know, you don't have to worry about me.”

Jonathan ran one hand through his hair. “But I do worry,” he said, more pointedly than he first intended, “because we did this to you, Maddox and I, by not realizing how things would look in the light of day.”

Hanna laughed softly. “No, everyone's mad about you. You have such a big heart, Jonathan. Even Xpress thinks you're playing house with Maddox only because you feel compelled by a secret honor code to protect my maidenly reputation.”

“Yes, my intentions, as good as they might have been, eventually backfired. So they must have been quite silly, too.”

“Ah, don't worry about a thing. And frankly? I had a good laugh over that little piece in Xpress.”

Jonathan stopped and stared at her. “But they tried to pin horrible things on you and even dared to call you names,” he argued.

Hanna stood up from her seat and performed a pirouette. “Do you happen to see any skin off my back? Sure thing, I did worry about Ray, but he's cool, too, as you well know.”

“Still, I feel guilty and that I should do more to right this wrong,” Jonathan insisted.

Hanna walked closer and gave him a quick hug. “Teach me how to make Ray's favorite the way he likes it, okay? Then we're even.”

“Of course.”

Hanna leaned in and grinned. “So, you and Maddox are all out in the open now, huh? Ah, damn it, but it’s because of me, right? Hmm, now I’m the one who’s sorry for rushing you guys to make your relationship public before you were ready.”

“Don’t worry about that for a moment. The fact that I managed to destroy Maddox’s reputation, all in a day’s work, only goes to prove that I have a knack for leaving disaster in my wake,” Jonathan said self-deprecatingly.

Hanna laughed and patted his arm. “You’re a bit old-fashioned, aren’t you? But I don’t believe Maddox thinks, for a moment, that he lost something important. Quite the opposite, everyone who saw him today must be convinced that he’s in love.”

“Xpress thinks otherwise,” Jonathan pointed out.

Hanna shrugged. “So? Who cares?”

Could there be people like that? Reputation was *raison d’être* for the Hamiltons. Jonathan felt cold shivers down his back each time he recalled how his father had stared at him when he was presented with the so-called evidence of his guilt. If the ground had opened up and swallowed him, he would have been saved a world of grief. But Hanna was shrugging it off as if it was no big deal, and he couldn’t wrap his head around it.

And yet, there it was. Another way of living life. Something new for him to learn and embrace, as he had left everything else behind.

## *Chapter Twenty-Four – Better Than Nothing*

Maddox watched as Rusty rested his head on his outstretched arm, while using his other hand to pour salt into his water glass. Getting the airhead off beer for at least the duration of the evening seemed like a lost cause. “Are you going to drink that?” he asked.

Rusty blinked lazily at him. He had brushed his hair, showered, and dressed in clean clothes, but that didn’t mean that his mind was less of a mess. Maddox wouldn’t outright say something cheesy like he was worried about his bestie, but in all truth, he was worried about his bestie.

“What’s it like?” Rusty asked, ignoring his question on purpose.

Maddox gave him a stare supposed to wither him on the spot. “I’m not telling you a thing about how it is to fuck Jonathan.”

Rusty grinned. “Come on, you’re dying to tell me.”

Maddox grinned back. Nah, he didn’t want to give details or brag or anything, but he did want to say something. “It’s frigging it, okay? But I’m not going to tell you more.”

“It’s because it’s different, right?” Rusty asked.

They were still waiting for their pizza to arrive, and they were already getting to the meatiest parts of their conversation. “You’re asking me if it’s different because he’s a dude? Yeah, it’s different,” Maddox confirmed.

Rusty pursed his lips and looked at him with unexpected candor. “That’s not what I mean. It’s different because you like him, right? Like really, really like him.”

Maddox nodded. And then, he realized that he wasn’t there to talk about himself and Jonathan. Rusty was deflecting and, as usual, he was damned good at it. “Yeah, so I wonder what you really, really like these days? Getting as much booty as you can?” He smirked to show that he intended to make light of the situation so that he could get near the real issue undetected.

No chance of that. Rusty’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t tell me this is an intervention thing or whatever.”

Maddox sighed. The waitress interrupted them for a moment as she placed the plates in front of them. Rusty seemed suddenly livelier at the sight of food and also at the waitress’s tight mini skirt. He gave her a long appreciative look as she walked away, and she threw him a come-hither smile over her shoulder.

“You’re such a dog,” Maddox said.

“She has a nice ass,” Rusty countered. “And legs. Two of ‘em.” He put two fingers up as if Maddox couldn’t tell what that meant.

“You’re still a dog,” he repeated. “Come on, man, this is me. What the hell is going on that you can’t spare a moment to sleep? You’re the king, everyone bows to you, but don’t you have enough already? You look like shit.”

Yeah, tough love had to be it.

Rusty pouted and ran his hands through his hair like Maddox’s criticism had just been a blow to his self-confidence. But, the next moment, he burst into laughter. “That Jonathan dude really has you by the dick,” he joked.

“Are you trying to get smart? And what’s Jonathan got to do with anything we’re talking about right now?”

“He has,” Rusty insisted. “Because you’re all serious now, you expect me to be serious, too.”

“How am I serious? Wait, are you saying that I’m boring now that I have a boyfriend?” Maddox stared at Rusty in disbelief. Not that he minded being boring, if it meant that he had Jonathan, and that was a pretty sweet deal. But what was Rusty getting at, anyway?

“Nah, that’s not it.” Rusty leaned back in his chair and stared at him with hooded eyes. “If there hadn’t been any Jonathan, you’d be busy competing with me for chicks right now.”

That was true. It was so true it was annoying. Maddox growled under his breath. Fuck Rusty and his being right. “Yeah,” he admitted with plenty of reluctance. “Still, I wouldn’t have been as fucked up as you are right now.”

“Not my fault chicks dig me so much,” Rusty said with a shrug and a smile.

Maddox jumped at the opportunity. “The real question is: do you still dig them? According to Kane, you don’t stay with one longer than half an hour.”

“Kane should mind his business, freaking lifer,” Rusty huffed. “And I last for way longer than half an hour.”

“No shit,” Maddox countered without any qualms about putting his bestie in his place. “Is your dick still attached to the rest of you?”

Rusty grinned and leaned over the table. “Wanna check?”

“Here, or should we wait until we get back?” Maddox said and gave Rusty his best shit-eating grin.

Rusty laughed so loud and hard that the people at the nearby tables stopped what they were doing to stare at them. Maddox had to kick his asshole of a friend under the table to make him stop. Rusty waved at the annoyed patrons and pointed at Maddox. “This guy’s a riot. He needs to do standup.”

Maddox had no problem with playing along with Rusty, either, when it was them against the world. “He’s just saying so. I’m not that funny.”

“Oh, dear, don’t be so modest,” Rusty drawled.

The people began to smile and returned to their meals and conversations.

“You got that from your boyfriend, too,” Rusty said as soon as no one was paying them any attention. “You’re gutsier.”

“I call bullshit,” Maddox replied. “I’m the definition of the gutsiest guy in the known universe. Always have been.”

“Yeah, but you weren’t kinky,” Rusty said with satisfaction. “I don’t think you’d have said anything before about wanting to touch the mighty Thor.”

Maddox covered his face and laughed into his palms. They really needed to keep this conversation on the right track, or the people around them might think they were nuts. “The mighty Thor?” he whispered as soon as he got his bearings back. “For real?”

Rusty puffed out his chest with pride. “So I’ve been told. I didn’t name him.”

“Yeah, sure, let’s leave it at that. Come on, Rusty, don’t make me chase you with a bat. Don’t chicks do it for you anymore? Why are you changing them like socks? Oh, wait, I stand corrected. I’ve seen you going outside with no socks at all, and it’s November.”

Rusty sighed as if Maddox was giving him too hard a problem to solve. “How do you know that Jonathan does it for you?”

“Is this bothering you? That I’m with him?” Maddox asked.

“Nope. But I want to know. What’s special? You know, about the whole thing.”

Maddox opened his mouth, but no sound came out. There were many things; where was he even supposed to start? And that wasn’t it. He found it difficult to explain because he wasn’t sure Rusty would be on the same wavelength so he could understand. So, for lack of anything else, he just stared at his friend in confusion.

Only to be met by an equally confused expression in Rusty’s green eyes that was not an act at all. “Well, it is,” he replied, somewhat defensively. “Don’t make me say cheesy stuff. I know you’re dying to.”

Like how Jonathan was the most beautiful person that must have ever lived on the face of the planet, and how his smile was so precious that Maddox wanted to steal it and keep it under lock and key, and how his body was so warm and tight and...

Okay, he needed to stop or he'd just end up having wide-eyed fantasies about his boyfriend of whom he couldn't get enough, nor believed he ever would.

Quick, he needed to get himself together. The fastest way to do that was to launch a counterattack. "What about cat boys?" he asked quickly.

Rusty blinked and looked at him in even more confusion.

Maddox reached for the ketchup bottle, just to pretend that he wasn't flustered because he had been thinking a little too much about Jonathan and his perfect hard body. Before, he would have never felt embarrassed about thinking of some girl and her nice curves; but right now, everything was different, and he felt the need to hide what he and Jonathan were doing when alone from the entire world. Not even Rusty was allowed there. It was just too private.

"What about cat boys?" Rusty asked, echoing his question.

"Don't tell me you're over them, too."

"I'll never be over cat boys," Rusty declared.

Good, good, that was a way to steer the conversation away from what exactly made his heart beat faster and his body go into overdrive whenever he did as little as think of Jonathan. "So? Get yourself a cat boy and see what it's all about," he suggested.

"I can't," Rusty pointed out as if it was the most natural thing to say.

"Why? Oh, wait, is 'can't' suddenly part of your vocabulary? That's a big surprise."

Rusty hesitated, and that look of confusion was back in his eyes. "I only want to pet one."

Maddox pinched the bridge of his nose. In any other universe except Rusty's, that had to be weird as fuck, yet, somehow it made total sense. He could picture Rusty patting the head of a dude dressed up as a cat, completely not ironically. "Just pet? You don't want to grab a laser and see if the guy climbs the wall, bent on catching the red dot, right?" With someone like Rusty, he needed to check.

Rusty looked at him like he was actually considering doing exactly that. Better not put any more crazy ideas in the guy's head, Maddox thought.

"Between you and me, Rusty, though," he said quickly, "do you think that you might be into boys? Maybe a little?" That could be a solid reason for all the confusion and the affirmation of Rusty's sexuality by throwing himself into any available bed on campus with a girl in it.

"Nope. Just cat boys," Rusty said with determination.

“Okay, I’m not going to fight you over it. You know better.” Maddox knew that Rusty didn’t do well with being told who he really was or what he was thinking by someone else. He usually thought about what he was told, but only if there was room for him to squeeze out, and that was why Maddox was giving him an exit right now. “Now, eat your pizza. I can tell you’ve only been eating crap lately.”

“Hey, don’t disparage those who don’t have the privilege of dating a chef. Hey, do you think you can convince Jonathan to sleep over and cook for everyone? And by that, I mean me.”

“I’m not going to do that, you lazy bum. And he’s not a chef. Just someone who knows how to cook.”

Rusty snorted. “You should kiss his ass and ask him to feed you.”

Maddox looked at his plate. Rusty needed to stop it with the innuendos. Sure, he loved kissing Jonathan’s ass and also feasting on that awesome cock of his, but right now, he had to think of anything else except that.

“You’re thinking of something kinky,” Rusty said with a laugh.

“Am not,” Maddox protested. “Shut up, cat boy lover. Just go chase some tail already.”

Rusty sighed theatrically. “I can’t, man, I just can’t.”

“You still didn’t tell me why, though.”

“Because I’m not gay like your gay ass,” Rusty replied and waited for Maddox to jump for the bait.

Maddox crumpled a tissue and threw it at his friend. Rusty dodged and laughed.

“My gay ass worries about your straight ass. Eat your food. And we’ll set some ground rules later. Like you cannot have more than one chick over a week.”

“Says who? Kane?”

“Everyone. Stop whoring around, you male slut,” Maddox said.

“All right. One a day.”

“Five days.”

“Three.”

“Deal.”

Still better than nothing, Maddox thought to himself. With Rusty, that uphill battle was always worth it, though.

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Jonathan smiled as he grabbed the phone. “Hey,” he said, feeling the now familiar warmth in his chest whenever Maddox was involved.

“Hey, do you think you can come out for a sec? I’m right outside your dorm. I know it’s late--”

“I’ll be right there,” Jonathan promised as he got off the bed and started changing. “I’m walking out the door right now. Don’t go anywhere.”

Maddox chuckled in his ear. “I wouldn’t dream of that.”

Was he talking too much? Jonathan felt heat rising in his cheeks as he walked into the hallway and grabbed his coat. Supposedly, they were official only in each other’s eyes, and they hadn’t had the chance to talk about it. But was right now a good moment? Did he sound too eager? Was he even right to assume that Maddox truly wanted it?

There was no time for overthinking. He found Maddox right outside and hurried to him as if the guy was a magnet and he a random fleck of iron. Maddox grinned from ear to ear and moved to meet him mid-way.

“Hey,” Jonathan said, feeling suddenly stupid and lacking any clever words to say.

“Don’t talk.” Maddox pulled him into a hug and kissed his lips hard.

Jonathan closed his eyes and abandoned himself to the sensation. Good thing he didn’t have to talk at all. His lips parted, allowing Maddox’s playful tongue to sneak inside. They were kissing as if they hadn’t seen each other in ages, when it was only this morning that they had been locked in a similar embrace, kissing in front of the entire campus.

This time, at least, they didn’t have an audience. Maddox moved slightly away, but then came back, and kissed him harder. Jonathan let out of small moan of pleasure as Maddox snuck his hands inside his coat and locked them just above the small of his back.

He was the one to tear away this time, but not completely. He kissed Maddox back and he was kissed back. Why did things ever have to be complicated? Kissing made everything seem so easy.

“Hmm,” he cleared his throat as soon as they let their mouths part ways. “Someone might see us,” he whispered.

“It’s late,” Maddox pointed out. “And we’ve already been outed, so what else can happen?”

“I don’t know. Maybe get busted for indecent exposure?” Jonathan asked.

Maddox laughed and teased his ear, while his hands moved lower and cupped Jonathan’s ass. “What indecent exposure?”

“Indeed,” Jonathan said and laughed. Then he remembered that he needed to say in person the same thing he had been messaging to Maddox all day. “I’m really sorry about how everything went down this morning. I had the best intentions--”

Maddox placed a finger against his lips. “Stop saying sorry. I mean it. Care for a little walk?”

“Sure.” Jonathan accepted Maddox’s hand wrapping around his and trembled slightly at the roughness and warmth he felt right away. “How’s Rusty?”

“Hopefully, less of a whore now that I talked some sense into him,” Maddox said with self-importance.

“He has quite the reputation,” Jonathan agreed. He understood Maddox’s concern, even though he didn’t want to say it out loud. “Is he going to listen to you?” He was curious, not only about Rusty and how Maddox could convince a free wild spirit like that to do the right thing, but about so many other things – all of them – that made Maddox who he was.

“We struck a deal,” Maddox confirmed. “So, just to check with you, we’re really boyfriends now, right?”

Jonathan hadn’t expected such a straightforward question. In hindsight, he should have expected Maddox to be the kind not to beat around the bush. “Um, yes. So everyone thinks,” he replied quickly. He hated how unsure his voice sounded.

Maddox burst into laughter. “It’s not a life sentence. You don’t have to be so gloomy.”

“I’m not,” Jonathan protested. And he would take that life sentence if it meant he would be with Maddox forever. Now those were silly thoughts. “I just barged in on you, without bothering to ask you first--”

“Hey, hey,” Maddox warned, “what did I tell you? Stop saying sorry, or I’ll make you shut up. Wanna challenge me?” he added in a playful tone.

Jonathan had an idea about Maddox’s means to shut him up. “Not really, or we might end up doing some unspeakable things in very public places.” There was comfort in knowing they wanted each other so much.

“I’m not against that,” Maddox said, rising to the occasion and pushing against him playfully.

“I am. I’d rather not have us both expelled on the grounds of not being able to keep it in our pants.”

“It?” Maddox challenged him. “You mean, my hand in your pants? I’d keep it there.”

“Stop joking,” Jonathan scolded him, but he was laughing, too.

“And then,” Maddox added since he was on a roll, “when anyone asks why my hand was there, I’d say that I was cold and needed to get warm.”

“Hmm. My pants appear to be just the right option for warming one’s cold hand,” Jonathan played along. “They’ll get that.”

“Not anyone’s cold hand,” Maddox contradicted him. “Mine.”

“Of course.”

They were walking aimlessly, talking silly. Jonathan couldn’t remember how his conversations with Drew usually went. It had all seemed so intense at the time; now it was far away and vague, those thoughts from long ago borrowing the texture of mist, full of nothing but bad memories.

“Hey, where did you go?” Maddox swung their linked hands to get his attention.

“I was just thinking.”

“Care to tell me about what?”

“Just how so different everything is now,” Jonathan admitted. “I wasn’t even thinking properly when I ran to you this morning. It’s like I’m living a new life.”

“Wow, that’s deep. You should have chosen something else as your major. Or do you specialize in magic potions in that chemistry lab? Ah, that explains how quickly you ensnared me,” Maddox said emphatically, like an actor on a stage. “It has to be magic.”

“Shut up,” Jonathan shot back with a laugh. “You’re the one who makes people believe the craziest stories. Although, you might want to work on your charm, because Xpress doesn’t want to even consider that you’re real about me.” *Are you real about me?* He wanted to ask that out loud. “We might have to convince them, you know.”

“I don’t give two shits about Xpress,” Maddox replied and snorted for good measure. “So I’ll be labeled as gay or whatever. I have you, and that’s what matters.”

Jonathan swallowed thickly. How nonchalant Maddox was. “I’m glad,” he said in a small voice.

“What? You’ll have to speak louder,” Maddox teased him.

Jonathan stopped to face him. “I’m glad that you think that. That... you think that I matter.” He did a great job of stumbling over his own words.

Maddox let go of his hands only so that he could pinch his cheeks, hard enough to make him protest.

“Hey, what was that for?”

“It’ll teach you not to be so insecure around me. Too bad I have to take you back ‘cause it’s so late. Or else, I’ll use all this,” Maddox gestured at his body, “to convince you of what I really think of you.”

How long was this going to last? Maddox seemed not to care about what Xpress and the rest of Sunny Hill thought about him right now, but in the long run... It was better not to think about it. Because even if Maddox suddenly decided that everything was wrong and pushed Jonathan away, these moments would still be real.

And it would still be so much better than having nothing at all, the way he had felt when Drew had thrown him under the bus to save his skin as if Jonathan was nothing but a stranger or, even worse, an enemy.

He caressed Maddox’s cheeks, basking in that beautiful smile. The campus was well lit at night, so there was no problem seeing each other, even in the dark. Still, he took in every line of that handsome face so that it would be with him forever.

Maddox knocked against his forehead. “You’re doing it again,” he said. “Just stop it, whatever you’re doing. I can bet my ass you’d be much happier if you just thought less of every single thing.”

“Don’t bet your ass,” Jonathan replied playfully and grabbed Maddox’s perfect behind for a second. “It’s too good to lose over a bet like that.”

“Oh, really?” Maddox drawled. “Do you like my ass?”

“Of course I like your ass.”

“Well, keep that in mind.”

“What for?” Jonathan looked at Maddox, trying to figure out what was going through the guy’s mind.

“You’ll see,” Maddox said in a secretive voice and reached for another kiss.

Jonathan wanted to spend all night here, kissing back. But it looked like one of them still had half a brain because, eventually, Maddox let him go. “Let’s get you in bed,” he said.

“Right,” he agreed. “Do you think we can see each other this weekend?”

Maddox snorted. "I'll see you any day you want. Oh, you mean, for--" He pushed Jonathan's shoulder and batted his eyelashes.

"Yeah, for," Jonathan said sternly and pushed him back, but he had to laugh.

"I'll get the guys out of the house somehow," Maddox promised.

"You don't have to, on my account. Maybe they want to study. And I'd feel bad," Jonathan said quickly.

"Hmm, okay. But Rusty has a cunning plan to get you into the kitchen. Apparently, you make conquests with your cooking, too," Maddox accused.

"I don't mind preparing something for everyone."

"I knew you'd say that. See, that's the problem. You're way too generous with others, when you should only think about how to give it to me in the bedroom."

Give it to him. Jonathan rolled the idea around in his head for a moment. Could Maddox mean... No, his imagination was running away with him again, and he needed to stop it. "All right. I'll give it to you," he said and turned a smidge so that he could push his ass playfully into Maddox's crotch.

The other grunted in exaggerated pain. "Hamilton, you didn't just do that. You're nasty."

"You're not the first one to tell me that."

"Let me guess. Rusty."

"That's the fellow."

"Stop making me jealous of him. And for the record, you're only nasty because you know I cannot fuck you with all the work we need to put in this week. By the way, I'll send you the project by the end of the week. It's almost finished."

"I'm impressed, Kingsley. You really are more than just a pretty face."

"Yeah, I'm a pretty dick, too."

They laughed at the same time at Maddox's joke.

"I should know," Jonathan joked back. "Anyway, good job, partner. Glad I got paired with you."

"I made it happen," Maddox said, puffing out his chest. "So be thankful to me."

Jonathan brushed his lips slowly against his. "Sure thing I am. Completely."

Maddox whined like a puppy and pulled him close, making their groins grind together. “Are you sure we cannot fuck until Friday?”

“We really need to focus on our studies, too,” Jonathan said, but he knew that he sounded like it wouldn’t take a lot for him to be convinced otherwise.

Maddox, however, appeared to know that there were other important things that needed attention. “Shit, I know. But let’s be clear. That whole thing with this being for only a month and all. It’s off. Don’t give me lip.”

“I’m not. I mean, okay. So it’s like... indefinitely?” Jonathan asked.

“Yeah. And I changed my mind. Give me that lip. No, give them both.”

Jonathan pushed him away playfully. “My lips are hurting already. Let’s just go before we do something we might not regret until finals come around.”

“Okay, Mr. Dictator,” Maddox reluctantly agreed. “But know that the moment you step into my lair, I’ll hear no more complaints.”

“I can see myself getting behind that,” Jonathan offered.

“Behind, he-he-he...” Maddox chuckled and smooched him nonetheless.

Mad Dawg was a funny guy. He had to ask about that now they were an item in the eyes of the world. But another time. Any more delays, and they might just end up spending the entire night outside, with neither of them wanting to go to sleep.

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Maddox huffed and placed the mirror at an angle so he could see properly. He winced as he brought the razor close to the skin. Then he withdrew his hand. “No fucking way,” he decided.

Well, he was a chicken all right. Maybe waxing was a better idea than shaving? But somehow that sounded like even more of a drag. Sure thing, not as dangerous as nicking certain parts by accident, but still like a lot of pain.

Hmm, so shaving was out of the question. He would need to entice Jonathan in a different way. Maybe he could get some sexy lingerie. Sexy lingerie? That definitely didn’t sound manly at all. He gave up and stood to his feet. He really needed to check some weird websites for advice.

He was on his laptop and lost in a world of strange recommendations when Rusty barged through the door. “What the hell, man?” Maddox turned toward his bestie. “What if I was masturbating?”

Rusty shrugged. “It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve stumbled upon you jerking off.”

“Really?” Maddox made a fierce face. “When was that?”

Rusty pondered for a moment. “Or maybe that was Dex. I can’t remember. All dicks look the same to me.”

“No shit, even the mighty Thor?”

Rusty grinned at him, quite pleased with himself. “He’s the only one I’m willing to shake hands with. He’s different.”

“You’re full of crap,” Maddox said. “What the hell happened that you felt the need to barge in like that?”

“Oh, yeah. It’s the wet t-shirt contest, man!” Rusty began waving his hands like that was the biggest news since landing on the moon.

“Hello, I have a boyfriend now. So, not into watching chicks getting wet,” Maddox explained. “Wait, a wet t-shirt contest in November? Who’s the nutso that came up with that bright idea?”

Rusty waved dismissively like Maddox was too slow. “It’s not for chicks. It’s for dudes. And we’re all in it. Jonathan, too.”

Hmm, Jonathan all wet, his perky nipples showing through... “Jonathan? Fuck no,” Maddox said. “I won’t let him.”

Rusty shrugged. “Too late. He got registered.”

Fuck. Everyone would get to see the goods. Maddox pouted and turned back to the screen. He needed to find a way to convince Jonathan to drop out of the stupid contest. It was only crazy shit students did, not like it counted toward getting good grades and stuff.

“Whatcha looking for?” Rusty asked from behind.

Maddox closed the laptop with a loud smack. “None of your business, asshole.”

### *Chapter Twenty-Five – A Boyfriend In Need Is A Boyfriend Indeed*

“I’m so nervous I don’t think I can eat anything until Friday,” Ray said while shoveling cereal into his mouth like it was the only thing that mattered in the world at the moment.

Jonathan pulled the bowl away from him, leaving his roommate with his spoon in the air and a guilty look on his face. “Don’t eat that, eat this,” he said and placed a plate with eggs and salad in front of him.

Ray shrugged and accepted the fork Jonathan offered him right away. “I mean, who would want to see me like that?”

“Hanna would,” Jonathan pointed out. “And stop making a big thing out of it. It’s just a practical joke.”

“Yeah, easy for you to say. I’ve seen you without your shirt, JJ,” Ray said accusingly and gestured with the fork. “But I look like a three-months-old chicken. Ah, I should just chicken out and be done with it. That should be in line with the rest of me.”

“Don’t you dare. Your girlfriend got us both registered, and we don’t want to make her mad, right?” Jonathan said. “She was quite adamant that we should be there. And all proceeds will go to an animal shelter, so isn’t that a good enough cause to show a little skin? If you don’t go, I won’t, either.”

Ray pouted, but then he reconsidered and sighed from the depths of his soul. “She’ll get upset if we don’t. I’ll hold her responsible for my public embarrassment.”

“I’ll be there, and I’ll hold your hand,” Jonathan promised.

“And risk Maddox’s wrath? No way.”

“Wrath? Seriously, I still don’t get why anyone would call him Mad Dawg in the first place. He’s one of the kindest people I know.”

“Yeah, I guess so, but I bet he’s the jealous type. I’ve seen how he looks at you all the time. Like this.” Ray pushed his eyelids upwards, exposing the eyes, and scanned around like he had laser vision.

Jonathan laughed. “Stop worrying, Ray. And I’ve heard that,” he cleared his throat and forced himself to stop laughing, “The Amazing Four will be there. That means that everyone else will be practically invisible. We have nothing to worry about, I’m telling you.”

Ray shook his head. “I appreciate your wanting to pretend that we’re in the same league. But I bet that you,” he pointed at Jonathan with the fork, “will win the contest.”

“I prefer to doubt that. With the likes of Maddox and his friends competing, I don’t see how. And no, before you say anything, it’s not false modesty. It’s the truth.”

Jonathan understood Ray’s insecurities, and from where he stood, his roommate had nothing to be ashamed of. But seeing how he himself was a bundle of vulnerabilities day in and day out, he was ill-equipped to offer some proper advice on the matter.

Then, an idea began to take shape in his mind. Well, it was wild and contained a considerable number of unknown factors, but if he put his mind to it, it could work and it was worth a try.

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“Why are you in that contest?”

Jonathan turned to face Maddox, who was staring at him with a pissed off look on his handsome face. They were in the hallway and had to go to class soon, so the timing was not exactly ideal for a conversation. Although, when it came to Maddox, Jonathan considered skipping class for like a moment or so.

“The contest... ah, you mean the one this Friday?”

“The wet t-shirt contest,” Maddox said through his teeth and leaned forward while holding his arms crossed over his chest.

He looked adorable and itching for a fight. Incredibly pretty, in a nutshell, and Jonathan had to close his eyes for a moment to stop the impulse to lean in and kiss those pouty delicious lips. As official as they were in everyone’s eyes, it didn’t do to kiss in the hallway like horny teenagers. They were, supposedly, responsible young men who knew better than give in to temptation like that.

“Well, what do you have to say for yourself?” Maddox asked.

“You’re in that contest, too, aren’t you?” Jonathan pointed out, failing to see what the issue was.

“Yeah, but that’s not the problem. You are.” Maddox changed his position and poked him in the chest.

“Hmm, are we having a fight?” Jonathan asked.

Maddox pondered for a moment. “Yeah. I’m not letting you go on stage and let everyone ogle you. Definitely, I cannot let them see this,” his voice dropped and he wrapped his hand around Jonathan’s right pec for a quick moment before pulling away.

“You’re a bit absurd,” Jonathan pointed out, fighting to ignore the small jolt of pleasure at having Maddox feel him up like that. “If we were on a beach, we would be a lot more naked than that.”

“You’re not allowed to go to the beach, either,” Maddox said petulantly.

“Really?” Jonathan blinked. “You’re half-way serious, aren’t you?”

Maddox started to smile but then reconsidered. He moved closer until their faces almost touched and whispered, “I am because I’m supposed to be the only one who gets to see you naked.”

“I won’t be naked,” Jonathan protested. “It’s for a good cause. Don’t tell me you want the kittens to go hungry.”

“Got me there,” Maddox played along. “But I’ll be jealous. Make sure to be ready to compensate for that when you drop by on Saturday.”

“I will. But since I got you here already, can I ask you something?”

“Sure. What it is, boyfriend?” Maddox drawled.

Jonathan took him by the shoulder so they could walk side by side. “It’s for another good cause.”

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Maddox knew a lot of things about why he liked Jonathan, but more and more were added to the pile every day. Sure thing, he had played it off as a joke that he couldn’t let Jonathan show off his amazing pecs to the world in the wet t-shirt contest, and he was still jealous, deep down, but his boyfriend’s idea was pretty brilliant, and they would end up turning the thing around for a good cause.

Dex and Kane had been on it right away. Rusty, as usual, had issued a challenge, and Maddox had had to tickle him until he couldn’t breathe to accept it. So, the stage was set, and they only needed to get moving.

Sure thing, everyone seemed to have an amazing time, especially the girls who found the show a lot funnier than it should have been. It wasn’t like it was freezing outside or anything, but still, standing there in wet clothes didn’t sound like an appealing idea at all.

Dex was the showman now, shouting some indiscernible victory chants as he held his arms high and showed off his body. The t-shirt clung to him, leaving nothing to the imagination, but Maddox wasn’t impressed. He had never looked at his friends that way, but the crowd was totally going crazy.

Rusty ordered the DJ to accompany his entrance with the right kind of music for a king like himself, and some reggaeton rhythms struggled to reign over the noises the guy’s fan club was making. He, too, made a show out of it, dancing languorously and rubbing his chest and abs. And since Rusty was Rusty, of course he took off his wet t-shirt and threw it into the crowd.

“And now, while you might want to see the rest of The Amazing Four,” the DJ boomed into his mike, “I’d say that we need an intermezzo to cool us down a little.”

The crowd booed and the DJ had to hide behind his battle station as small objects of questionable nature began flying toward him. The DJ, however, was a brave man, and the chords of some fancy classical music replaced Rusty’s reggaeton.

Maddox had known that moment was coming, but that didn’t mean he was prepared for it. Jonathan walked onto the stage, nodded politely at the DJ and waited for the guy in charge to pour the bucket of water over him.

Magic or not, Maddox tuned out the crowd as he watched Jonathan run his hands through his hair to push the wet strands away from his eyes. His eyelids fluttered and his lips parted, making Maddox’s heart beat faster. Then, he shyly rubbed the back of his neck and opened his eyes. His perfect pecs showed through the wet t-shirt, and the fabric clung to the mounds and valleys of his abs, offering everyone looking the unhindered sight of a body that didn’t belong to an athlete like Dex or Rusty, but was still the most desirable of them all.

Maddox turned his attention to Jonathan’s face once more, and then noticed the red tinge on the height of his cheeks, the increasingly frantic movement of his eyelids, and the small trembling of his lips.

Then sounds returned, and the crowd cheered loudly in his ears. Without caring about the consequences, Maddox jumped on the stage and took Jonathan by the hand.

“Oh, the jealous boyfriend appears,” the DJ shouted excitedly.

Maddox moved to block the crowd’s view of Jonathan and hugged him tightly.

“Maddox, what are you doing?” Jonathan whispered.

They both gasped when another bucket of cold water was thrown over their heads, and laughter could be heard from all directions.

“These guys need to cool off a little,” the DJ taunted them from his station.

“Just follow my lead,” Maddox said to Jonathan. He brought their mouths together in a kiss and held his boyfriend there until he felt the trembling in the other’s body subside.

“Look at them snatching the big prize,” the DJ went on, while the crowd continued to go wild.

Maddox pulled Jonathan away from the stage, making sure to stand between him and the crowd all the time. He waved and smiled at everyone and high-fived the DJ on his way out.

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“Where are we going?” Jonathan mumbled.

The shower room in the pool building had to do as it was the closest. Maddox closed the door and turned the warm water on. He helped Jonathan out of his wet clothes and then pushed him under the hot spray.

He undressed, as well, and stepped to Jonathan’s side. Without caring for the other’s meek protests, he embraced him and kissed him. Jonathan was melting into his arms, the questions on his lips turning into soft moans. Maddox drank each and every one of them, while his hands wandered all over Jonathan’s body, teetering between reassurance and desire.

When Jonathan threw his head back and offered his throat, Maddox knew for sure what he had to do. He hiked the other up in his arms and pushed him with his back against the tiles.

“That’s a bit--” Jonathan tried to protest, but Maddox swallowed his words with a kiss.

“I want you like this,” Maddox replied. The warm water spraying down his back made him shiver in pleasure as his cock pushed between Jonathan’s buttocks. “Look at me, okay, just look at me.”

He did, his eyes wide-open and full of desire and something else Maddox didn’t yet dare to give a name. “Hold me, please,” Jonathan said in a soft whisper.

Maddox didn’t want to be rough, but his need skyrocketed at the plea. There was no way he’d be able to get inside like that, so he just rubbed his cock between Jonathan’s perfect mounds, letting out desperate moans with each movement of his hips.

Jonathan came to the rescue, wetting his fingers and working his hole and Maddox’s cock with his saliva.

“Are you sure?” Maddox asked.

“Yes,” Jonathan confirmed, and he helped him inside, but still Maddox went at it excruciatingly slowly for both of them.

Only their labored breaths could be heard bouncing off the walls. In that mist, they were alone, far away from the world, and no one else mattered. Maddox kept penetrating Jonathan with both his tongue and cock, the union of their bodies making the temperature rise all around them.

He was getting dizzy from too much pleasure and the effort of holding Jonathan like that and fucking him in that crazy position.

“Inside me, Maddox, please,” Jonathan begged.

“Are you close?” Maddox asked, his entire body shaking. “Are you with me?”

“I’m with you,” Jonathan confirmed.

Maddox held nothing back. Their bodies slammed together, one time, two times. There was a third, but it all went off with a bang, as Maddox shuddered and came inside Jonathan’s body, that wonderful ass squeezing him tightly and drinking him dry.

Minutes later, they were both sitting on the tiles, the shower still raining over them. They were resting with their backs against the wall and breathing hard.

“Thank you, Maddox,” Jonathan whispered.

“Don’t mention it,” Maddox replied and held the other’s hand tightly in his.

“Back there--”

“You don’t have to say a thing unless and until you want to.”

“Later, then,” Jonathan murmured and moved to rest his head on Maddox’s shoulder.

Maddox moved his arm to hold him and put his cheek against Jonathan’s wet hair.

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“O. M. G., JJ, do you believe it?” Ray bounced up and down excitedly. “I won! I won the wet t-shirt contest!”

“Congratulations,” Jonathan said affably and hugged his roommate. “I didn’t doubt it for a moment.”

“Sure thing you didn’t,” Ray said and snickered. “I overheard Hanna’s girlfriends, you know? Maddox and everyone went around, telling people to vote for me.”

“Ah, damn, you weren’t supposed to know,” Jonathan complained.

“Well, it was either that, or I was starting to suspect that I woke up this morning in some alternate reality. One in which I was suddenly hot.”

There was no possible way to make Ray think negative thoughts. If only he could learn that secret, Jonathan mused for a moment.

“Seriously,” Ray said. “Thank you, JJ. That really gave a boost to my confidence. On the other hand, you and Maddox, wow! Take this, Xpress,” he added and made a victorious fist. “What are they going to say now when Maddox was so jealous that he couldn’t let anyone stare at you as good as naked?”

“I really hope that they will stop sniffing around,” Jonathan replied. “The recounting of Maddox’s past conquests is growing a bit old.”

For several days now, Xpress had focused on presenting Maddox in the most heterosexual light possible if that was a thing. Jonathan had to admit that he had been curious at first, but then some semblance of self-preservation had stopped him from foolishly exposing himself to unneeded doubts and hurt.

The same instinct, however, must have been sound asleep when he had climbed on that stage, without realizing that the high level of exposure might do a number on him. Good thing Maddox had intervened like that, and without being asked, which was extraordinary, seeing how not even Jonathan himself had been aware of what was going on before it was too late.

“How about something special for the winner?” he asked Ray.

He needed something to keep his hands busy, so that his mind could process what had happened. His life was different now, and he wasn’t supposed to worry about trifling matters anymore. Who cared about a little exposure? It was healthy, he decided, angered at himself.

“Um, did that flour do something to you?” Ray asked.

Only then did Jonathan notice that he had slammed the bag a bit too hard on the counter, making a fine dust rise in the air. He chuckled and shook his head. “No, not at all. I was just wrapped up in something in my head. Math-related,” he added for good measure and to make sure that Ray wouldn’t insist on knowing more.

Was he ready to talk about it? But what was there to talk about? That he had been so sheltered all his life that the moment he had been exposed for everyone to laugh at, he found it the most unbearable thing in the world?

Logic didn’t work, and that was, in itself, a disturbing thought. Why would he be so silly about such an unimportant matter? No matter how much he thought about it, there was no possible way for him to find a way out.

But Maddox had found it for him. He had rushed to the rescue, a knight in a wet t-shirt, not some shining armor, but effective and glorious nonetheless.

“I’m going to spend the weekend at Maddox’s house,” he said as he began preparing the dough.

“Awesome,” Ray said. “That means that I can throw a slumber party for Hanna and I. We might go a little crazy, seeing how I’m like a rock star around here.”

“Oh, yes, crazy,” Jonathan commented. “Will you two stay up all night playing board games? That’s about the craziest thing I can think of you two doing.”

Ray pretended to make an offended face. “You don’t know us well enough, obviously.”

“But I do know that you like extra topping on your pizza. Tell me the truth, Ray, does microwave pizza taste at least half as good as the kind made in an oven?”

“If you make it, it’s twice as good,” Ray said. “So, did you give Maddox a good talking to about how he should stop being jealous and let you shine a little?”

Jonathan could do with a lot less shining these days. He needed to take things slowly. The entire Maddox affair had put him in the spotlight, and it had been his choice, but now he was starting to feel like a bug under the microscope.

Not that Xpress paid any attention to him since they were way too busy trying to make sense of Maddox’s bisexual awakening or whatever name they chose to give to his now very official relationship with Jonathan.

“Actually, I didn’t,” he eventually answered Ray’s question. “I think I like him a bit jealous.” He truly did. It hadn’t been Maddox’s jealousy that saved the day... but he wouldn’t go into details at the moment. First, he needed to put his head in order.

Or just give up for a moment and figure out a way to enjoy his time with Maddox over the weekend, seeing how his backside was pretty much in no mood right now for an encore after the rushed sex they had in the shower earlier today.

Not that he hadn’t enjoyed it. Oh, for sure, he was deeply convinced that only Maddox could make him combust like that, but there were physical limitations, too prosaic to mention, that didn’t allow him to go as crazy at it as he wanted.

Maddox was, certainly, a man known for his prowess in bedroom affairs, according to Xpress. With that also came an amazing appetite, without a doubt, and now, Jonathan felt that he was falling short.

Somehow, he needed to negotiate a middle ground for both his unstoppable hunger for Maddox’s sexy body and his ass that was in much need of a rest.

A promise was a promise. He couldn’t back out of spending the weekend with Maddox, especially since he was now much indebted to him. He would talk about it and assure Maddox that it wasn’t a lack of want on his part stopping him from putting out, as kids said, but rather other matters.

It wasn’t a particular conversation he was keen on having, but he needed to show a little more courage, or else how could he call himself a man?

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“Are you sure you don’t want us out of your hair?” Kane asked and took a critical look inside the fridge. “What’s with all this stuff?”

“Jonathan wants to cook. For everyone,” Maddox replied. “And he insisted that I don’t have to send you away while he’s here. So, you can thank him for not having to find a party where they’ll have you,” he teased his friend.

Kane snorted. “There’s no shortage of parties, but I’ll thank Jonathan nonetheless. We really have to study.”

“Is Jonathan going to cook?” That was Rusty, coming down the stairs. He walked over to Kane, pushed him away from the fridge and looked inside. “There’s going to be a lot of meat, right?”

“Yes,” Maddox replied.

“I’m going to eat everything,” Rusty made a solemn promise.

“Wait,” Kane intervened, “are you telling me you’re going to spend the day here, not somewhere at some sorority house, going through all the girls, top to bottom?”

“And tomorrow. And even tonight,” Rusty replied matter-of-factly. “I love good food.”

“More than your kinkster persona?” Kane questioned. “If you tell me you’re going to study, I’m going to pinch myself.”

All nonchalantly, Rusty closed the fridge door and pinched Kane on the cheek.

“Ouch, you idiot, you’re going to leave bruises,” Kane protested.

Rusty laughed and gave his buddy a loud kiss on the forehead.

Kane pushed him away. “Get the fuck out, you fucker. And don’t slobber all over my handsome face like that.”

Dex chose that very moment to walk in. “What are these two going on about?” He pointed at Kane and Rusty and went to the fridge, as well, to grab himself a beer. “Wow, are we hosting Master Chef or something? What’s with all this?”

“Jonathan is going to cook,” Rusty and Kane said at the same time.

Dex smirked and then looked at Maddox. “And you’re fine with that? By how you dragged Jonathan out of the contest yesterday, I thought you wanted to lock the guy in a dungeon and turn into a dragon to keep everyone away from those sexy pecs.”

Maddox was really relieved that no one else had seemed to catch a whiff of what was going on with Jonathan. “Yeah, sure, but you’re my buddies, and he actually insisted that he had to do something in exchange for imposing on your space. If it were up to me, you’d all be out on your asses this very moment.”

“Well, good thing it’s not. It’s excellent to hear that the smartest of you two calls the shots in your family,” Dex said.

“We’re not married yet,” Maddox said defensively.

Kane and Rusty stopped their slapping about, in which they had been silently engaged for the last few minutes. “Yet?” Kane asked.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Maddox protested. “Stop bugging me, or I’ll tell Jonathan not to come.”

“Yeah, right, like that will happen,” Dex said with a snort. “It looks to me like you cannot last a day without molesting the guy.”

“Hey, he’s not complaining,” Maddox pointed out.

He was sort of worried about Jonathan’s ass after their unexpected romp the day before. Even if he had yet to indulge in that kind of delight, he could tell that it hadn’t been too easy for Jonathan to take his gun with their clumsy preparations.

But that didn’t matter. Maddox had opted for a jockstrap, eventually, and was planning on giving Jonathan’s beautiful ass a well-deserved rest. If all went well, by the same time, tomorrow, he’d be a changed man, and all for the better.

Unless he fucked it up somehow, but he wasn’t going to dwell on the negative. But what if he turned into a chicken, again? After all, he had been afraid of shaving his ass. Ah, damn it.

“What are you mentally verbalizing over there?” Dex asked, interrupting his train of thought.

“Nothing,” Maddox said and stood straight, like it was a teacher asking him a question, and he was in second grade.

Rusty just couldn’t keep his mouth shut. “Maddox doesn’t know how to ask Jonathan to top him.”

Why, oh why, did the idiot have to be too clever for his own good? True, he had eyes as quick as his wits, and that was why closing the laptop that time had accomplished nothing.

Three pairs of eyes were on him. He moaned, “Rusty, I’m so going to kill you, you asshole.”

“Just ask him,” Kane hurried to say. “I bet he’d love it.”

“What do you even know about gay sex?” Maddox countered, miffed that his secret was out in the open, courtesy of the village idiot.

“I don’t, but I suppose that it cannot be too hard.”

“Um, it has to be hard,” Rusty intervened again. “When you put something up your backdoor--”

Kane promptly put one hand over Rusty’s mouth. He calmly began, “Rusty, you little clown you, in this house, we don’t want to hear about your crazy anal adventures. And stop embarrassing Maddox.”

Maddox had to admit that he was curious to hear what Rusty had to say, even if it was about something crazy, such as the kinkster putting his ass up for some girl to peg him – which he didn’t know if it was true or not since Kane had been too quick to silence their mutual buddy. As for the embarrassing him bit, it was too late for that. He could feel the tips of his ears burning like a furnace.

Dex walked over to him and dragged him away by the shoulders. “Let me show you something real quick upstairs.”

Maddox wanted to protest and convince Rusty to overshare, but the serious look in Dex’s eyes told him to shut it, for the moment.

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“I can call my folks. And you can ask them whatever you cannot ask the Internet,” Dex said promptly. “Ah, and I’ll be out of the room while you talk.”

That was Dex for you, the true friend. Maddox shifted his weight from one foot to another. “Would it really be okay?” he asked and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Yeah. I might joke about their sex ed advice, but they’re cool people, as you know.”

Maddox nodded and took a deep breath.

“So, do you want me to call them?”

He nodded again.

And twenty minutes later, he felt a lot more confident about how things were going to go with Jonathan. Also, if he needed any confirmation that Jonathan also wanted him that way, he just got it, and he felt pretty damn good about it.

Yeah, pretty damn good.

## *Chapter Twenty-Six – Bottoms Up!*

Jonathan hesitated for a moment before knocking. Why was he so nervous all of a sudden? Oh, yes, he needed to remind himself, he would actually spend some time in the company of The Amazing Four, and it wasn't the cringe-worthy nickname that bothered him. He adjusted his cuffs and straightened his collar, feeling his skin a bit too hot. It wasn't like they didn't know him, but, in a way, this was official, and things were getting serious.

He shook his head in mirth. Basically, as Ray had put it candidly before he walked out the door, he was being introduced to the 'family', the one on campus, so to speak. Damn, all his nervousness was well-founded then, right?

He raised his hand to knock, but before he managed to do that, Maddox opened the door and offered him a dazzling smile. "How long were you going to keep me here, waiting for you to knock?" he asked. He then took Jonathan's hand and dragged him inside.

Three extra pairs of eyes were on him that very instant, and Jonathan felt the redness creeping from under the collar of his shirt, up his neck and to his cheeks.

"You know these jokers," Maddox interrupted the tense moment. "Say 'hi' to Jonathan, assholes."

"Hi, Jonathan," a chorus followed, and Jonathan had to stifle a laugh by biting his lips. As weird as that had to sound to anyone's ears, it felt as if the others were just as nervous as he was of being evaluated by their best friend's boyfriend.

"Hi," he replied and waved, a bit stiffly.

Rusty jumped off the sofa, taking everyone by surprise, and walked over to him. Jonathan didn't know what to expect when Rusty suddenly pulled him into a long hug. Maddox had to push him away. "Hey, hey, that's enough," he warned, only half-joking.

Rusty smirked and winked at Jonathan while giving him a naughty once-over. "Yo, Hamilton. You dangled some fine goods in front of everyone yesterday. Too bad you have a jailer as a boyfriend," he said, pointing at Maddox.

Jonathan was sure his eyes were growing so wide now that they threatened to jump out of their sockets. By instinct, he held Maddox tightly, afraid that his boyfriend might just start something. The hard muscle under his fingers was tense, but Dex defused the situation right away by groaning and starting to talk. "Welcome, Jonathan. Too bad you happened to drop by while the circus is in town."

Rusty immediately identified his next target and dashed to ram his head directly into Dex's hard chest. Dex didn't seem in the least surprised by the attack. However, he promptly caught Rusty

in a headlock and kept him there, seemingly amused by the other's struggles to break free. To prove that he wasn't even breaking a sweat, he continued to offer Jonathan an open, easy smile.

Kane shook his head and walked over to him, his hand extended as a peace offering. "Yeah, it's pretty much a clown house around here," he confirmed with a sigh. "Good to have you here, Jonathan."

He shook the offered hand. "It's not a problem. It's very lively," he noted while throwing a short look at Dex and Rusty who were still engaged in a little war of their own, "but I don't mind it. And I'd rather you all feel as much at ease as if I weren't around."

Kane smiled and gave him a thumbs-up. "Maddox kept asking us to behave, not that his speech reached certain ears," he said and his eye roll was clearly pointed at the other half of The Amazing Four. "But you know, I'm glad we finally got to meet you properly and have the chance to get to know you better."

So, Ray was right. It was like meeting the family. "The pleasure's all mine," he replied with a slight tip of the head.

"Just listen to these dorks," Rusty said snickering, after having finally and mysteriously gotten out of Dex's hold. "What's next? Sipping tea with the pinky raised?"

Kane turned to his roommate with a murderous look in his eyes. Jonathan began to laugh. Maddox must have told his friends some crazy things about him. "I told you, guys. Just do whatever you'd do if I weren't here. And now, if you'll excuse me, I think I have some cooking to do."

"Well, thank heaven for that," Dex commented. "Kane, let's get some studying done. Thanks for not needing us in the kitchen, Jonathan. I don't know if Maddox told you, but for us, the fridge means the place where we keep the beer and not much else."

With that, Dex grabbed Kane by the shoulder and they walked out of the room together. Jonathan didn't miss, however, the brief exchange taking place between the two. He was being measured, all right.

He decided to stick to the plan and head to the kitchen. Seeing how effusive Ray always was about his cooking, he hoped he had the means to win over these guys. Maddox followed him closely, but, to his surprise, he wasn't the only one.

"Whatcha doing, Rusty?" Maddox asked, drawling the words with a little bit of a warning tinging the tips of his consonants.

"I want to watch you two cook," Rusty replied promptly.

"Don't you have anything else to do? You know, chasing skirts, stuff like that?"

Jonathan was a bit surprised at the undercurrents in Maddox's words. He either wanted very much for them to be alone, or he was getting a bit jealous of his buddy, hence mentioning Rusty's current favorite activity, which was to maintain his king of hookups status on campus.

"Nope. I'm all yours tonight," Rusty replied promptly.

"Lucky us," Maddox commented under his breath.

Jonathan took him by the shoulder and leaned in to brush his lips over Maddox's ear. "Don't be petty," he whispered. "Let him stay."

Maybe Rusty was just as curious as Xpress about Maddox's bisexual awakening. Jonathan wanted to believe that, at this point, they had nothing to hide, especially in front of such close friends. Just in case Rusty found it hard to believe that Maddox was truly attracted to him, there was nothing wrong with letting him have a front row seat, while the two of them behaved like boyfriends.

Which they were, obviously, Jonathan thought, as Maddox's hand lingered on his waist for a bit longer than needed.

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Rusty wanted to get on his nerves tonight, Maddox thought, as he gave his bestie the evil eye. Jonathan was, as usual, nice and polite, explaining what he was doing as he went about his cooking. From time to time, Rusty would ask questions, and Jonathan offered explanations without once being fazed by the other's campy comments.

Maddox wasn't paying attention in the least to the cooking process. He was much more interested in what the hell Rusty was playing at. They had known each other for a long time, so he liked to think that he was pretty much an expert when it came to Rusty and his body language, more than any other. No one knew Rusty like he did. Kane said so, and Kane had the annoying habit of being almost always right.

And right now, Rusty's face was an open book, as he was staring at Jonathan in awe. Even if he joked around and asked foolish things such as why couldn't humans just eat raw meat since their ancestors surely did, his eyes didn't lie.

Maddox pouted and crossed his arms. His best buddy was looking at his boyfriend like he was some kind of alien; not the kind with green skin and large eyes, but one...

Oh, fuck. Maddox looked at Rusty even more closely. Oh, yes, that glint in the guy's eyes was hard to miss, just like the way he cocked his head to offer some stupid and charming comment to make Jonathan laugh.

To Rusty, Jonathan was a freaking sexy alien! He slammed his hands on the table and stood up abruptly.

The other two stopped their silly to and fro and stared at him. Rusty smirked and challenged him. Jonathan gave him a small silent warning with his eyes.

Maddox shrugged and walked around the table. "I'm supposed to help you," he said brightly. "And so far, you've given me nothing to do."

Jonathan blinked and a small smile curled his beautiful lips. Maddox found himself leaning forward so that he could get just a little bit closer and bask in that precious smile. "There's nothing left to help me with. It's all in the oven now, so we just need to wait."

Damn. He had been so absorbed with Rusty's sudden fascination with HIS boyfriend that he had missed out on the entire thing. Pissed enough to look away, he finally let his eyes land on the one responsible for everything. "Whatcha looking at?" he asked Rusty. He grabbed a small piece of vegetable from the table and threw it at his buddy.

Rusty giggled and moved out of the way in time. Jonathan grabbed Maddox and breathed into his ear. "Don't play with food, Maddox. It's not nice."

For some reason, the way the whispered reprimand caressed his ears caused a small frisson to course through his body. Maybe it was the thing he was planning for later, but it already felt as if Jonathan was the one in charge.

Rusty looked him up and down and smirked again as his eyes landed low enough to leave no room for interpretation. Maddox frowned and turned toward Jonathan. "This clown is pissing me off," he said petulantly.

Jonathan let his arms rest on Maddox's shoulders and looked into his eyes. "Why?" The smile that came with that single word let him know that Jonathan suspected him of being jealous and also found the idea quite funny.

Still, Maddox pondered as he narrowed his eyes and took in Jonathan's smiling face, there was a hint of something else in there. The guy liked that, oh, he liked that very much if he were reading the not-so-hidden lust in Jonathan's eyes correctly, and the way he wet his lips like he couldn't wait for them to be alone.

"Can you show me?" Rusty interrupted their private moment.

They both looked at him at the same time. "Show you what?" he asked aggressively.

Rusty shrugged and leaned back in his chair, bringing his linked hands behind his head and giving them a hooded look. "You know," he drawled, "what's the deal. People just can't shut up about you two."

“Feeling a little pushed out of the headlines?” Maddox alluded at how Xpress appeared only to care about his ass lately, much to his annoyance. “Go watch some porno if you’re so curious about two dudes going at it.”

Rusty snorted. “I’ve seen plenty of that.”

Oh, really? What?! Maddox exchanged a short alarmed look with Jonathan. It shouldn’t have come as much of a surprise with Rusty being Rusty and all, and his desire to explore everything sex-related with the passion of a true researcher.

Rusty leaned forward and placed his linked hands on the table. He cocked his head in that way he knew was charming and could convince anyone to do whatever he wanted. “Kiss,” he said matter-of-factly. “Then I’ll know it’s not bullshit.”

Maddox gave Rusty a shocked look. By now, his bestie had to know it wasn’t bullshit, so what was with the challenge? Jonathan cupped his cheek gently and turned his head. “No harm in that, right?” he said, and Maddox was lost that very moment, because he was staring at those enticing lips getting close to him.

He let out a small surprised whimper when Jonathan caught his mouth with his. Firm hands rested on his hips and then pulled him closer, and Jonathan began kissing him for real, giving him plenty of sweet tongue.

It did feel nice to be attacked like that. He embraced Jonathan back, fighting with all his might not to let his hands go lower and grab that fantastic behind and lose it completely.

Their bodies fit together, the sole exception lying south of the belt for both of them, those parts of them a bit too excited, even given that they had an audience.

An audience?! Maddox pulled away abruptly and turned his head.

Rusty was no longer there.

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“So,” Kane began, “why so mysterious?”

For a while, they had all been busy devouring the food on their plates, which had made Jonathan happy. Right, he needed to offer some explanations to the ‘family’, and it looked like Kane was the delegated mouthpiece.

“What do you mean?” he stalled for time while playing with his napkin.

Kane shrugged. “You know. No one knows why you transferred here.”

“Personal issues,” Jonathan replied and regretted the tension in his voice right away.

“Hmm,” Kane said.

“Hey, Jonathan’s not here for you to grill him like the freaking FBI,” Maddox warned his friend.

“Sorry, my bad,” Kane said but he still looked at Jonathan like he was telling him that he would be keeping his eyes on him. “We just want to know who our boy is dating.”

“Your boy?” Jonathan asked, quirking an eyebrow.

Dex laughed. “Kane is curious. So am I. But seeing how you bribed us with food tonight, we’re not going to lay it on too thick this time. We just want to know who you are.”

“He’s an awesome kisser,” Rusty interjected.

Jonathan felt his cheeks getting hot. He was still getting used to having this out in the open, no holds barred, kind of conversation.

“Just like in movies,” Rusty added. “I saw it,” he added with emphasis.

Jonathan had to give it to Maddox’s bestie for not being as half as bad as people kept saying he was. Sometime, during their kiss, he had chosen to walk out and done so quietly. Still, it seemed like he had seen enough to have formed an opinion about what kind of kisser he, Jonathan, was.

He still didn’t know what to make of Rusty, not completely. For a while, when Rusty hadn’t come down from his room to join them at the table, Jonathan had worried that being witness to a very gay kiss between his friend and a stranger must have put the guy off. People could pretend to be all right with it until it happened in front of their eyes. Yet, Rusty looked nothing like he was feeling that way now, despite his tardy appearance to the table.

“Well, then we don’t need to know anything else,” Dex said and looked at Jonathan with questioning eyes.

It was a bit unusual to see friends so interested in someone’s personal life. But again, how would he know what that was like? Before Sunny Hill, he didn’t even believe such people were real, except in TV series. And now, Maddox had his friends, and he, himself, had Ray, who wanted him to be happy and was invested in his life for no other reason than that.

For everyone, it had to be odd that his life was such a closed book. People in their early twenties weren’t supposed to have pasts difficult to bear. Even Jonathan believed that he was absurd in thinking he was the exception, but, on the other hand, he couldn’t help how he felt about the things that had happened to him and Drew that time.

One day, he’d be ready to let others know about it. But now wasn’t that time, and he knew it. Maddox’s friends would have to wait a little longer.

And who knew what would happen in the near future? For now, they were completely infatuated with one another, but that didn't change the fact that, as Xpress put it, Maddox had been a ladies' favorite for so long. At any given moment, the novelty could wear off and, just like that, Maddox could jump back over the fence, right into the loving arms of his numerous female fans.

There were no guarantees.

"You, guys, stop right now, or I'm getting pissed at you," Maddox warned. "Jonathan filled your bottomless bellies with food, and you only think about drilling him for info."

"You only think of drilling him," Rusty accused, making the entire table break into laughter and defusing the situation.

Jonathan took a sip out of his glass, in an effort to will his heartbeat to slow down. That reminded him of the particular situation he was in, and the favor he needed to ask of Maddox.

"Thanks for the food, Jonathan," Kane said and raised his glass, too. "Now, bottoms up!"

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"Sorry about these assholes," Maddox told him as soon as they were behind the bedroom door, with no one as an audience this time around. "I hook up with half the campus, they don't give a damn. Now that I've gotten a boyfriend--" He swallowed his own words. What the hell was he doing, reminding Jonathan how he had used to be the king of hookups at Sunny Hill?

"It's all right," Jonathan assured him. "I suppose that I would be just as curious and maybe a bit worried. Not so long ago, I thought Hanna was a Playboy bunny bent on destroying my Ray."

"Your Ray?" Maddox teased.

"Ah, damn. It looks like everyone is a bit possessive around here. It must be something in the water," Jonathan joked.

Whenever one of them went a bit too far, whether it was hooking up or something else, the others acted together to help him get back on track, now that he thought about it. Rusty might be the exception. No one could put that guy back on track, mostly because there was no actual track with Rusty. Even Kane had to admit defeat on occasion, until the next time, of course, since he seemed to forget who he was dealing with.

Yeah, Rusty was a never-ending source of surprises. When he hadn't come to join them at dinner, Maddox had sincerely thought that his and Jonathan's gay kiss must have broken the kinkster somehow. But no, Rusty had eventually descended from his lair, and by the loose movement of his limbs and the satisfied smile on his lips, Maddox would bet the guy had rubbed one out.

“I was more worried about Rusty. I thought he hurried to the bathroom to throw up or something after watching us kiss.”

Maddox snorted. “Yeah, right. He was in a hurry, all right, but not for the reason you think.”

Jonathan threw him a confused look. Maddox had more pressing matters to attend to than talking to his boyfriend about what could be happening with Rusty lately.

And those pressing matters brought him to the part where he was supposed to show bravery like never before in his life. Therefore, he nonchalantly took off his shirt and pushed down his pants.

Jonathan stared at him, his lips parted. “Straight down to business then?” he asked in a small voice.

Maddox smirked. All right, so, basically, he knew how to be a seducer, right? Even if it was going to be a bit of a change regarding who nailed who tonight, he could play it like usual, without a problem. However, after the way Jonathan had taken the reins when kissing earlier in the kitchen, he had a fantasy of the guy dominating him a little and making him yield with his strong, sexy body.

Maybe another time. Seeing how clueless Jonathan seemed to be more often than not, that meant Maddox needed to teach him how to play the top role, and it was a noble task. He got rid of the jeans and pushed them away, remaining naked save for the jockstrap he had bought for this particular occasion.

A small gasp from Jonathan assured him that his actions, so far, were aimed true and hit home. He made a slow turn, to offer the guy a good look from all angles.

“What’s this?” Jonathan’s strangled voice was a reward in itself.

Maddox grinned, winked at him, and then climbed on the bed, lying on his belly, lifting his ass just a smidge to ensure that there was no mistaking what that meant. “Do I have to paint an arrow on my back to make it clearer?” he asked.

“Oh, Maddox, wow, I mean, is this--” Jonathan trailed off and made the bedsprings dip as he climbed on, too.

The amber eyes were lit with a new light, and Maddox’s bravery wavered. What if it wasn’t quite enough? What if it hurt? What if he was a lousy bottom?

He grunted when Jonathan planted both hands on his ass and pushed the cheeks apart as if to get a better look. “Um, should I have shaved my asshole for the occasion or something?” he asked quickly.

Jonathan shook his head slowly like he was in a trance. His eyes and all his attention were clearly trained on the single part of Maddox's body that interested him right now. It would have been good to make the rest of him disappear, especially his brain that was getting the heebie-jeebies right now, whispering at him to run.

"No, you're simply gorgeous," Jonathan whispered. "Perfect," he added, and the next thing Maddox knew a hot tongue was delving right into his ass. His mind was a fried circuit board the following second. The sensual attack turned his knees into jelly, and pleasure shot from there in all directions.

The good part was that they didn't have to talk at length about it. That was also the bad part, because that would have given him some time to prepare for having Jonathan's cock in his ass.

Oh, no, he had seen the thing. It was pretty big. And long. He closed his eyes and, by reflex, his butt cheeks, too, managing to push Jonathan away at the same time.

The other was silent, and somehow, Maddox worried that that silence was a sign that Jonathan, like the gentleman he was, would back off, sensing his hesitation.

The sudden hard slap on his right ass cheek made him reconsider. "Ouch," he protested. He stared over his shoulder. The smile Jonathan gave him let him know he was very wrong. No gentleman was supposed to smile like that while standing behind an exposed behind.

"Open up, don't be a tease," Jonathan ordered, and his eyes flashed with want. His lips were still curled into a smile, but he was not his usual shy self.

Not when it came to sex, Maddox reminded himself; before, that determination on Jonathan's part to be involved in the game had definitely worked to his advantage, but what about now?

Now, he was at the guy's mercy, and by how Jonathan looked at him like a hungry man in front of a feast, his calculations of being the one in charge the first time had been for nothing. It looked like there was a new sheriff in town.

He groaned and buried his face in the pillow. Jonathan caressed the slapped butt cheek and spanked it again.

"Hey," Maddox protested again, "what was that for? I'm putting out, okay?"

The words died on his lips as Jonathan licked the part of his butt starting to burn from the slaps. Well, that felt nice, he thought and smiled. Jonathan moved and pressed him down, gluing his chest to Maddox's back.

It looked like there was no room to run. Jonathan hovered above his ear, blowing hot air over it. "Maddox, are you sure? I know this isn't the first time you're hearing it, but you're killing me."

“Sure I’m sure,” he said. Jonathan’s weight on him was very much real. A part of him wanted to push the other away and run, but the rest of him wanted more of it, wanted to know how it would feel.

Jonathan adjusted his position once more and let one hand wander down Maddox’s back, making him shiver at the new sensations. Yes, Jonathan was a love-maker, not the kind to treat this as just a fuck and nothing else.

“You have an amazing ass,” Jonathan praised him and licked his ear slowly. To make it clear, he rested his hand on Maddox’s ass and began to knead the flesh in earnest.

He was a bit rough, but not as rough as Maddox felt that he should be. “Um, do you think you could... spank me a little more?” he asked.

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Jonathan was beyond himself; elation coursed through him as his hand wandered all over Maddox’s body. To have this young man, this fantastic body, surrender to him in such a straightforward fashion, was more than he had ever dreamed of.

Maddox’s question took him by surprise. Just earlier, he had worried that he might have gone a little bit too far, but the slight resistance from the other had triggered unknown feelings in him. A part of him wanted to hold Maddox down and go to battle with him for that incredible ass. But the rest of him wanted to hold him gently and go at it as slowly as was possible before he lost his mind completely.

“Spank you? But I thought you hated it,” he teased, aware of how his voice trembled a smidge.

Maddox lifted his ass to make a point. “I trust you.”

Three little words. Jonathan felt a surge of new want and he smacked Maddox’s nice behind once. But then, despite the urgent demands that he should do it more, he reached for the other’s chest and caught a nub of flesh between his fingers. At the same time, he bit Maddox’s ear. “You’re a bit too naughty for your own good, Maddox Kingsley.”

“No shit,” came the miffed reply.

“Hmm, by this time, I’d thought you’d chicken out and ask me to stop.”

“Ha-ha. So funny. How about you do me already, Hamilton? I had no idea you’d be such a slowpoke about it. If you moved only a little faster, I’d no longer be a virgin by now.”

“Trust me,” Jonathan said, surprised at how deep and sure of himself his voice sounded, “you don’t want me to go fast.”

“Are you going to yap your mouth all night or--”

Jonathan bit his lips not to laugh and surprised Maddox with another smack on his ass. “Good. I can see that there are ways to shut you up.”

Maddox might have had ideas of protesting some more, but Jonathan moved so that he could rub the guy’s cock through his sexy jockstrap, while using his other hand to circle the exposed entrance and tease it.

Taking advantage of how Maddox seemed to be too wrapped up in what had to be a new wave of sensations for him, Jonathan made quick work of opening the small tube of lube he had carried in his pocket, especially for this special occasion.

His fingers went in slowly, making Maddox moan into the pillow.

“Don’t be ashamed,” he whispered. “Your ass will do so nicely.”

“Who’s ashamed, asshole?” Maddox protested.

“Are you challenging me?” Jonathan asked, only then realizing that a battle of sorts was supposed to happen.

“You don’t seem to take a hint,” Maddox pointed out.

“Hmm, true,” Jonathan admitted. He added another finger, making Maddox gasp. “How about now?”

“Ha. You’re a coward,” Maddox threw at him.

Jonathan rolled his eyes. It took him so damned much control to play it cool and focus on giving Maddox time to adjust, it just wasn’t fair to be provoked like that.

“I think you need to be put in your place a little bit,” he growled playfully in the other’s ear.

He made a show of pulling Maddox’s hips up and positioning himself behind him.

Maddox looked at him over his shoulder. “Is this where things are supposed to get real?”

“Not just yet,” Jonathan replied. There was nothing he wanted more than to see how it felt to fuck the mighty Mad Dawg. But he had never fucked anyone in his life, so Maddox would have to forgive him for taking things one step at a time.

One of these steps being to sink three fingers into that crazy heat and earn another moan of pleasure from his lover.

## *Chapter Twenty-Seven – The Inevitable*

Was Jonathan still hesitating? What was all that dallying about? Maddox felt slightly on edge, a need to push his ass against that probing hand at odds with the words stuck in his throat, words that would demand he be spared. He took one deep breath; it was, no doubt about it, the most maddening experience in his life so far. Jonathan's presence felt so real, even if he kept his eyes closed. Maddox could easily picture the slightly parted lips, the eyes lost in lust and wonder, as Jonathan moved his fingers ever so gently, going deeper only by mini-fractions of an inch with each thrust.

"We're going to take all night like this," he commented, and his voice quivered.

"Allow me," Jonathan said in a throaty sexy voice, "to look at you like this just a little longer."

"Okay, you're making it weird," he joked, but the tremor in his words didn't go away. "You're staring at my butt."

"A very sexy, very naked butt." Jonathan used one hand to rub Maddox's cock through his jockstrap. Together with the fingers pressing deeper and deeper inside his ass, it made for an alien sensation that Maddox wasn't sure he could endure much longer. It was, at the same time, too much and not enough.

Jonathan wrapped his hand more firmly around Maddox's hard shaft, bent on doing something.

"I don't think I can come like this," he said.

Just as the words left his mouth, Jonathan moved his fingers differently, making him keen in surprise. He had played with himself in the shower, he had, but this was deeper, more relentless, impossible to stop. The hand moved faster on his clothed erection, and Maddox groaned, part in disbelief, part relief, as he came like that, with no other extra stimulation.

"Did you wet your undies?" Jonathan teased him.

Maddox was breathing hard, finding it difficult to get over the fact that he had come so fast, and somehow, from his ass. But he wasn't the type of dude to dwell on being surprised. He was actually curious to feel it again. Jonathan had withdrawn his fingers and was now playing with the hemline of Maddox's jockstrap, like he was suddenly too shy to take things further.

He couldn't have been more wrong about what was going on. Jonathan managed to move somehow and squeeze himself between Maddox's spread knees while lying on his back.

Maddox let out a small sound as the jockstrap was pushed away and his spent cock was taken inside a hot mouth. He pushed himself up on his hands only so he could watch his lover sucking him. "Now that's a new position for a blowjob," he noted out loud.

Jonathan flicked a seductive look at him. And he had thought himself to be the one on top. This guy had the upper hand even with his mouth full of cock like that. Maddox had no rebound trouble when it came to Jonathan. His cock was swelling again, making Jonathan's eyes grow wide in surprise.

"You were supposed to fuck me," Maddox pointed out, although he couldn't protest too much. This felt way too awesome to say he didn't want it.

Elegant fingers were back at his backdoor, and this time, they slid in with more ease than before. And the alien sensation was back, only that it wasn't as alien as before, and Maddox began to chase after it while closing his eyes tightly. He bit his bottom lip, and it took him a while to realize that he was making all kinds of weird sounds. Jonathan was taking him down to the hilt, guiding him to fuck his mouth to a rhythm while fucking him with his fingers, too.

A move forward and he was dying from pleasure as he could feel the tip of his cock stopping against the back of Jonathan's throat. A jerk of the hips backward, and his ass was suddenly in heaven.

He no longer wanted to protest to whatever Jonathan's plans were. His lover just knew better, it seemed, and he was not in the least reluctant to leave it all to him.

It was impossible to stop the blissful sensations, and the thought that Jonathan was gulping down his cum like it was the only thing he desired to do was enough to make him moan loudly and buck his hips wildly a few times.

Jonathan withdrew only after licking Maddox's cock properly, cleaning it of the last drop of sperm, like the thorough man he was.

He heard Jonathan undressing, but he was just too spent to watch the show. Later, he'd ask his boyfriend to dress and undress a few times only so that he could get his fill of striptease shows.

It looked like Jonathan was quick about it, because the bed dipped again, and a strong arm wrapped around him and held him by one shoulder possessively.

"My turn," Jonathan whispered in his ear.

His eyes snapped open. So this was when things were getting real.

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It was completely new to hold that strong body in his arms, so pliant and obedient, lax still from the last climax and ready to surrender itself completely. Jonathan fought the choking sensation in his throat; it came from too much happiness, but that didn't mean that he was doing a good job at reining it in. He grabbed Maddox's right hip and pulled the round ass to him.

His own erection throbbed, neglected for far too long already. Good thing he had thought of giving Maddox pleasure before he got down to business, because he was certain he would offer a subpar performance. At least some of the disappointment would be alleviated.

“Are you going to fuck me while it’s still today?” Maddox provoked him, and it was easy to read the hint of laughter in his raspy voice.

It seemed that even guys called Mad Dawg could lose their voices if properly fucked. Well, that wasn’t exactly true since Jonathan had yet to get to the actual fucking part. The fingering test, so to speak, proved that Maddox would enjoy getting something bigger in there, but that still didn’t do too much for his obsession with how he would perform.

“Do you want to mark it on your calendar?” he opted to tease Maddox a little more and played with one of his nipples.

“Yeah, why not? Among the many dates marked as ‘My boyfriend still didn’t give me the D’, it would be a welcome change, don’t you think?”

Jonathan stopped for a moment, his hard cock pressed between Maddox’s enticing buttocks. “Are you telling me you’ve been thinking of this for a while now?”

A snort followed. “Yeah. You’re so freaking dense sometimes, Jonathan, it’s no longer funny.”

It was true. He was too wrapped up in his own head to understand what was going on around him more often than not. Had Maddox dropped hints, and he had failed to notice them? “Wait, since when--”

“You started it,” Maddox accused him. “And after dangling your hard cock in front of me, you put your ass up for fucking again and again.”

“Um, sorry?” Jonathan offered and laughed.

“Not that I don’t like fucking you,” Maddox pointed out, a bit miffed. “I fucking love that. Your ass is everything. But, come on, you don’t tease a guy about popping his cherry only to chicken out every time.”

“Hmm, so that means that I should finally put an end to this misery of yours,” Jonathan said.

Teasing banter notwithstanding, his cock was in an unbearable situation. He adjusted his position so that the tip could finally align with the searing heat in which he longed to bury himself. Maddox jerked in surprise. Jonathan couldn’t take it any longer. He grabbed Maddox’s hips tightly, steadying him for penetration. “Tell me you want it,” he said quietly.

Maddox looked at him over his shoulder. Then, to Jonathan’s dismay, he rolled away, escaping his hold.

“Are you chicken?” Jonathan taunted him, but his heart faltered. There was nothing he could do if Maddox changed his mind.

“Chicken, right,” Maddox said with a snort. “Come here. I fucked you like this the first time. So I want the same.”

Jonathan’s heart leaped at those words. He was a bit clumsy as he moved between Maddox’s thighs, but once there, everything fell into place. “Maddox,” he whispered, his breath coming in short hitches.

Maddox offered him another of his amazing smiles. “Look, I get that you’re new to this, but just go with it and you’ll be fine. Lube,” he said and fished out the small tube from the folds of the sheets.

Jonathan nodded, in a trance of sorts, as Maddox locked his eyes with him and moved his hand over his cock to make it slick enough. “Now fuck me. And no, I won’t change my mind,” he assured him.

There was only this much someone could endure, challenged like that. Jonathan kissed Maddox deeply, and his cock pushed inside. He swallowed each moan and word of possible protest from that sweet mouth, while he delved in, body and soul.

It was like nothing he had ever felt. All his firsts before Maddox didn’t matter. To him belonged the first time having his cock sucked. The first time fucking a sexy man. The first time...

Falling in love for real. He moaned around Maddox’s tongue giving chase to his, as the inevitable realization struck him. Maddox’s body opened to him, sucked him in completely, and he was no longer himself, or maybe he was just somebody new, somebody who could learn how to be happy.

“Yeah, baby, be hard,” Maddox teased him and laughed, throwing his head back and exposing his throat.

Jonathan wished he could laugh, too, but he was busy literally fucking Maddox into the mattress. The bed was groaning under them like rickety old bones, and there was a chance this piece of furniture might not survive the night.

“Doesn’t it hurt?” he asked through his grunts and moans.

“Not as much as I thought after seeing your gun,” Maddox teased him some more, but his pretty gray eyes were dreamy, and sweaty strands were glued to his forehead. “Or maybe you did a good job by getting me off before nailing me to the bed.”

Jonathan couldn't let him talk anymore. He kissed and kissed Maddox Kingsley, while his cock went in and out of a beautiful body that wanted him completely. "I can't, I can't," he groaned in despair as he thrust inside with all his might.

Maddox wrapped his legs tightly around him, forcing him to go deeper with each move. There was no escape.

"Just shoot inside me," Maddox ordered and took Jonathan's lips hard, making him go wild.

This was what they called the point of no return. Jonathan couldn't escape the inevitable, just as he couldn't escape falling in love. He let out the strangest sound that had ever left his throat while all his need poured inside Maddox's tight heat. The thing was good at closing in on him, threatening to pull his cock out by its roots, that powerful it was. Only then he realized the reason. Maddox shuddered, his eyes closed, his lips whispering curses directed at no one in particular.

"Are you--" he choked on the intensity of his own release.

It felt endless, like a tsunami that grew and grew. And when it washed over him, Jonathan plunged, no safety net, and he was promptly caught by strong arms and held, beating chest against beating chest, while his own lips let out words lacking all meaning but one.

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"Wow," Maddox whispered. "Fuck me, right?" he joked.

His entire body was jelly, incapable of moving. Jonathan lay on top of him, the sweet smell of his sweat all around them. Long fingers caressed his cheek, and his mouth was made to stop yapping by a searing kiss. "Fuck you, right," Jonathan confirmed in a spent voice.

They both burst into laughter at the same time. Jonathan didn't laugh often, at least not like this, so unbound, so unrestrained. It sounded so damned good to hear him.

"How is my ass going to feel tomorrow?" he asked a direct question.

"Hmm, probably the same way mine felt after our little tryst in the showers," Jonathan offered promptly.

"No way. I was rougher with you, plus," Maddox added, "mine is bigger."

"Are you kidding? Are we playing that game?"

"There's no need to play. We both know how things stand. I'm the biggest," Maddox boasted, triggering another laugh from Jonathan.

Once the laughter subsided, Jonathan moved his head enough so that they could look at each other. “How was it?”

Maddox felt his soaked jockstrap. “This thing’s unusable now. I’d say you’re an awesome top.”

“You came... from it, right?” Jonathan asked.

And that shy part of the guy was back again. “Come on, man, you made me come thrice. You gave me a hand job, a blowjob, and an ass job.”

“An ass job? I had no idea it was called that,” Jonathan pointed out. “Well, I did hear about half-ass jobs--”

“No halves about you,” Maddox contradicted him right away. Right, his ass was feeling it still, all of it. He squirmed a little.

Jonathan moved right away with a look of concern on his pretty face. “What’s wrong?”

Maddox reached out for him and caressed his cheek. If he brushed his thumb over that bottom lip just right, Jonathan’s eyes went all hazy, and next thing, his breath would become short. Too bad that after coming three times, he was simply too wasted to follow up with something worth mentioning. So he just held Jonathan’s cheek in his palm, taking in just how beautiful he was. How did this dude walk out into the world every day without making everyone crazy about him? A lot of people had to be blind because Maddox couldn’t tear his eyes away and, if he thought about it, he had been like this from the start.

He blinked slowly and smiled to reassure the other that he wasn’t in pain or anything. Jonathan chuckled and kissed him softly.

“It’s not the end of the month or anything, but I think you deserve a prize,” Maddox announced solemnly.

“A prize? I just got the biggest prize anyone could ever give me,” Jonathan said.

Maddox snorted and rolled his eyes. “So, if anyone gives you a bit of ass, you’re all ecstatic?”

“No, silly,” Jonathan protested. “You’re the one who gave me his ass. That’s what I’m talking about. But, since you insist on giving me something more, I’m more than willing to receive it.”

Maddox wanted to tease his boyfriend a little more. “What does more than willing mean?”

Jonathan seemed a little confused. “It’s just a way of saying. Consider me very willing to hear about this prize.”

“It’s something that your curious ass wanted to learn about,” Maddox gave him a hint.

Jonathan narrowed his eyes and started thinking. “Ah, right. Are you going to tell me why you’re called Mad Dawg? Oh, wow, I wasn’t expecting that.”

Hmm, Jonathan was just too clever. Whatever, he’d still have a laugh over the thing, and Maddox wanted nothing more than to hear him laughing again. “Well, I was in kindergarten--”

Jonathan snickered and covered his eyes in an exaggerated motion. “Please, please, don’t tell me it’s something so wholesome that I’m going to lose it.”

“Hey, do you want to hear the story or not? And don’t you dare sell it to Xpress, although I bet they’d make you rich for it.”

“Like I’d talk to those insufferable bastards even if I knew who they were,” Jonathan countered. He frowned slightly, and Maddox could only guess what put the guy in a foul mood at the mention of that digital rag, as Dex called it.

“Forget about those assholes,” Maddox said quickly to smooth over his misstep. “Let’s get back to my story.”

“All right,” Jonathan agreed and rested his head against Maddox’s shoulder.

Like it was the most natural thing in the world, Maddox began caressing Jonathan’s hair. It was so silky under his fingers. He loved it, like so many other things about him. “So, you see, I don’t know exactly how my folks chose the name Maddox for me, but you can imagine that it was a bit too much for a kid in kindergarten to pronounce properly. Therefore, whatever sounds left my mouth when I was asked what my name was--”

“Wait, wait, I think I know where this is going,” Jonathan interrupted him. “Did you start calling yourself Mad Dawg? Were you into rap music from an early age?”

“No. If you don’t want to listen to me, just keep jumping to conclusions. But, first, I need you to swear that you won’t tell a soul about it.”

“I bet your friends know about it.”

Maddox had to admit that was true. “Yeah, but they don’t count. Or my family.”

Jonathan moved so that they could look into each other’s eyes. “All right, Mad Dawg,” he drawled the words on purpose, “how did you come by your crazy nickname? Did you turn into a bad boy? A gangster? Were you peddling Pokémon cards on the playground?”

“Oh, you’re so very funny, Hamilton. No, it’s simpler than that. It was either be called Maddie all my life or Mad Dawg. I had to control the narrative, you know. So Mad Dawg it was, from like first grade when I realized I didn’t want to be called a girl’s name.”

Jonathan rolled on his back and began laughing, an arm thrown over his face.

Maddox linked his hands over his belly, enjoying the sound of Jonathan's laughter. "According to mom, I was also attached to the name Meadow for a while, but don't ever remind Rusty of that by accident. He'll start making sheep sounds and try to graze on my hair."

"Get out of here!" Jonathan laughed louder, and it took him a full minute to stop and begin to wipe the tears from his eyes. "I'll tell Rusty that, only so that I could snap a picture of him trying to eat your hair and show it to Ray."

"Don't you dare, and I mean it." Maddox was quick to roll on top of Jonathan and pin him down.

"All right, all right. Ray doesn't have to know," Jonathan said, assuming a defeated stance and letting his body going slack. "As your boyfriend, I suppose I need to protect your reputation."

They were so comfortable like this, naked skin against naked skin, and Maddox realized right away that while he had been thoroughly satisfied so far, not the same thing could be said about Jonathan. From their playful position, Maddox leaned in and kissed Jonathan. There was instant yearning in how the other kissed him back. "I know," he said in a whisper, "that tonight was all about you fucking me, but can I? Just a little?"

Jonathan's eyes were shining. "Yes, please."

Maddox chuckled and held him close while Jonathan allowed him to get between his legs properly. "So polite. Make sure not to talk to strangers. They might fool you into doing who knows what only because you're incapable of saying 'no'."

One of his hands followed the contour of Jonathan's right flank, making him tremble slightly.

"With you, it's not that I'm polite," Jonathan explained. "With you, I really mean it."

"Hmm," Maddox drawled, "then say 'please' again."

"Please," Jonathan exhaled, his curly eyelashes fluttering so prettily.

"Please, what?" Maddox teased him.

"Please, fuck me, Maddox," Jonathan supplied right away.

"Now, since you're asking nicely..."

He'd have to be gentle, he knew that. Jonathan had mentioned something about his wrecked ass from the day before, so Maddox took his time to prepare him, using fingers and lube, until his boyfriend was nothing but a quivering mess under him. And when they moved together, they fit so well, two halves of a whole, and Maddox kissed Jonathan, again and again, until they were both out of breath.

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“Will you spend the day here, too?” Maddox asked.

Jonathan blinked slowly. “Is it Sunday already? What time is it?”

“It’s just six-thirty.”

Jonathan moaned in undisguised despair. “Don’t tell me you don’t want to sleep in a little after last night.”

That wasn’t it. If it meant that he could sleep with Jonathan in his arms, playing big-spoon-little-spoon, he wouldn’t get out of bed for the entire day. “I do, but I need to make sure that you’re not going to run back to your dorm the moment we get up.”

“You’re so sweet,” Jonathan teased. “Of course I’ll spend the day.” A small pause followed, indicating nothing good was to follow. “Anything for you, Maddie.”

“Oh, no,” Maddox moaned, “I had a bad feeling you’d jump on it like a dog with a bone.”

“It’s cute,” Jonathan mumbled and he sounded like he was going back to sleep. “Better than sheep food, right?”

And that had been a mistake, too. Maddox snorted. So that was what people got when they got themselves boyfriends. Jonathan was already sleeping, his breathing regular, lulling Maddox back to sleep, as well.

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“How was it?”

“Fuck, Rusty, do you always have to scare people like that?” Maddox had left the bathroom door open while brushing his teeth, lost in thought over the events from the night before. Jonathan, the sleepyhead, still protested against waking up and was hogging all the pillows, so Maddox had let him sleep a little longer.

Rusty put his hands up. “Someone’s a little jumpy. Got something up your ass?” Of course, the asshole had to say that with a grin that split his face in two while giving him a slow once-over.

Like that would phase him. Maddox scowled. “No. By the way, did you ever put something in there?” His question came off as more aggressive than he intended.

Rusty blinked twice and pursed his lips like he was trying to remember, and then put up two fingers with what looked like pride in his eyes.

Maddox’s jaw fell under sea level. “You’re kidding me, right? Your own fingers or did you put someone else up to it?” *Someone like a guy?* Nah, he’d keep that last bit to himself. Rusty was so adamant about being straight that it was no use provoking him.

Rusty made a face like he couldn't believe he was asking that. "Some chick drilled me. I don't think she only used her fingers, though." He pondered for a moment. "It might have been the neck of a bottle at some point, but I'm not sure."

Maddox rubbed his forehead hard. Either Rusty was totally pulling his leg, or the kinkster did go the extra mile whenever the occasion presented itself. "Well, assuming that you're not just pulling my leg like an asshole right now," he said under his breath, "how was it?"

Rusty pouted. "Not fair. I asked you first." He pushed one finger against Maddox's chest to challenge him, accomplishing his goal right away.

Anything was better than confessing about the night before, no matter how curious he was about Rusty's explorations. So, he grabbed Rusty's hand fast and turned him quickly to capture him in an inescapable headlock and wrestled him to the bathroom floor.

Rusty always rose to the challenge, so they began a real battle that ended fast when he banged his head against the wall. "Ouch!" he let out and took advantage of Rusty releasing his grip to overcome him and get on top.

He was now straddling Rusty while his hands clasped the other's tightly and they were pushing against each other, neither one of them willing to give up.

"Um, should I come back a little later?"

Jonathan's smooth voice made him stop in an instant. He got off Rusty quickly, feeling slightly unnerved by being caught like that. Now Jonathan would think he was some kid, not at all boyfriend material. Rusty stood and followed his example, looking, for some unexplainable reason, extremely guilty.

"No, no," Maddox hurried to say and pushed Rusty out, while dragging Jonathan inside the bathroom. "Here's a spare toothbrush, and this is the toothpaste, um, and this is the soap--"

"And that is a sink, and that is a shower stall," Rusty continued, standing in the doorway and pointing with one hand at the various bathroom appliances, with a very serious expression on his face.

Maddox pushed him out completely and closed the door in his face. Then he turned toward Jonathan and his eyes grew wide when he noticed how his boyfriend was biting his lower lip like he was struggling not to laugh.

He bristled right away. "Whatcha laughing at?"

Jonathan sighed to stop the bubble of laughter in his chest and grabbed the spare toothbrush. "You kids are something," he added in a pretentious fake voice and winked at Maddox before putting the toothbrush in his mouth.

Great. Just what he needed, his boyfriend to think he was some kid. It was all Rusty's fault. Next time, he'd kick his ass and it would definitely feel more than two fingers or the neck of a bottle or whatever.

## *Chapter Twenty-Eight – Just Boyfriend Things*

He had never had friends like that, Jonathan thought, friends to wrestle with on the floor, or tease or be physically close to without it seeming weird in any way. No, in the world of his family and life from before Sunny Hill, such things weren't allowed. The whole Drew incident could be blamed on his lack of interactions of that kind with other boys. Even if others at his school before didn't exactly fall into the same category as him when it came to family expectations, he hadn't gotten too close to anyone.

Everyone there knew him. Maddox joked about narrative, but he had had one of his own before putting his foot inside a school. He was groomed to become someone people whispered about, and that meant other boys either approached him because they were pushed by their parents or their own ambitions to cozy up to the guy who came from a rich family and had all the trappings of a desirable connection.

At first, he had been pleased with the attention, but he soon realized that those attempts didn't come from a good place. He had polite, standard relations with people he came in contact with, and God forbid anyone thought of getting too close.

He was envied, Drew had told him on more than one occasion. In their highly competitive environment, he was supposed to be number one, a winner, and that without even competing. It wasn't fair; he had studied as hard as anyone else if not harder, just to prove that it wasn't his family's money that made him into a stellar student. It could have been his fault that he had not tried hard enough to get close to others, but he wasn't good at that to begin with.

Here, at Sunny Hill, where no one knew him, people had befriended him without a second thought. Ray couldn't care less about his family and had declared him his bestie from the first time they met. Maddox wasn't impressed by his pedigree, as Xpress called it, either.

He was finally being treated like a normal person, and it mattered a lot, a lot more than he'd ever expected.

What he didn't understand, though, was why Maddox shifted his weight from one foot to the other, while impatiently waiting for him to finish brushing his teeth. Jonathan looked at him a few times, but Maddox looked away like he'd been caught doing something he shouldn't.

He hurried to finish just to hear what that was all about. "Well," he said, resting against the sink and crossing his arms. "What's the matter?"

"I'm not a kid," Maddox warned him, pointing a finger at him.

Jonathan shrugged and then smiled as he looked the other up and down. Maddox was sexy in anything he wore, but in white shorts and a tee, his hair still a bird nest, he looked absolutely edible. "All right," he said and put his hands up in surrender, "my bad."

“Rusty is, though,” Maddox took care to point out.

Jonathan cocked his head and stared a little more. “Would it be so bad to still be a kid?”

Maddox rolled his eyes like he couldn’t believe the question. “I am boyfriend material,” he said and pointed at himself.

Jonathan let his eyes wander lazily all over Maddox. These days, he was behaving less like his old self, and more like a much better version. At least, that was what he liked to think, now that he was far from the life he knew before, a life that had felt like a cage, something he could only perceive now that he was free of it. “Top notch boyfriend material,” he confirmed.

“What do you mean?” Maddox eyed him suspiciously.

Jonathan laughed and reached for him to pull him into a hug. “Exactly that. You’re the best boyfriend material anyone looking for a boyfriend can find in the entire world.”

“You mean it?” Maddox asked while wrapping his strong arms around him.

Jonathan cupped his cheeks and kissed him loudly. “Completely.” Was it truly all right to admit to these things so freely? Would they be fine down the road? He chased away any anxious thoughts circling him like wild dogs. “Now how about we free up the bathroom? Rusty might need it.”

“He could go piss outside,” Maddox replied promptly. “Like the dog he is.”

Jonathan bit his lip hard. Picturing Rusty with a leg raised by a tree, his tongue lolling, crossed his mind. And he wasn’t the guy to picture such things; no, Jonathan Hamilton was supposed to think only correct thoughts and follow proper etiquette down to a tee, with both heart and mind. “I’m afraid that might end up in Xpress faster than your bi awakening.”

He bit his lips for another reason. Why was he so bothered by it? After all, he had Maddox in his arms, and he shouldn’t care about what some gossip publication chose to fill its virtual space with.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Maddox admitted. “And I don’t want to spend the entire Sunday in the bathroom, now that I have you all to myself.”

“What would you like to do?” He had very little experience in what boyfriends did on Sundays they decided to spend together. He and Drew never did that, but after all, he and Drew had never been boyfriends to begin with.

Maddox seemed more knowledgeable than he was in that respect. “Just boyfriend things,” he replied with a shrug.

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Luckily, Rusty wasn't waiting outside the door, ready to tease them just for the fun of it, and Maddox was silently grateful. Still, he needed to ask the clown why the hell he had looked so guilty when Jonathan walked in on them. Not that it was anything to walk in on, to begin with, but behaving so childishly surely lowered his market value as a boyfriend. He needed Jonathan to take him seriously. So far, their relationship had just happened like a game of ping-pong, with each player running to catch the other's ball.

Or balls. Maddox shook his head and took a deep breath. Last night, after taking a shower and deciding to go to sleep, Jonathan had spoiled him with a proper ball licking and sucked him off one last time.

Damn, he wasn't supposed to get hard again after what they had done last night. His ass felt it, Jonathan's ass had to still be recovering, but just thinking of that hot amazing tongue on his cock was enough to make him want a blowjob, no matter how quick.

And he had told Jonathan so nonchalantly that they would do boyfriend things. If he just grabbed the guy and dragged him to his lair for more sexing, what would that make him? Surely enough, not that great a boyfriend.

What did boyfriends do when spending a Sunday together? Maddox stole a quick look at Jonathan. Did he have enough time to google it? Pizza date, they had done that. And they had ended by sucking off each other. Which had been awesome. Could they go for a swim again? That had ended up with them jerking each other off. And then going through a boatload of misunderstanding.

They could just go walking or joy riding. Car sex... Maddox let his mind wander; now that was something worthy of checking off the list. A pleasant walk was the safest bet because it was the least problematic option if he was keen on keeping his hands off Jonathan for at least some part of their Sunday together.

Of course, there would be another part of the day when they'd be indoors again, and if they were indoors, it meant that they would spend some time in bed because he only had one chair in the room, and if they were in bed...

He needed to stop thinking. Maybe even breathing, because he could still detect Jonathan's cologne was on his clothes now from rubbing too much against the other. And if he thought of that, he immediately thought of how nice Jonathan's skin smelled, and... He groaned and rubbed his eyes.

"We didn't exactly talk," Jonathan whispered, "but how are you feeling?"

They were at the table, having breakfast, luckily alone, but Jonathan was that kind of nice guy who didn't want anyone to overhear their conversation about sensitive things by accident, even if they were Maddox's friends.

Hmm, talk. Now that was a good idea. He turned his head toward Jonathan and smiled. “How would you feel about a walk around the lake? We’ll take the car.”

“I’d like that,” Jonathan replied and smiled, as well. “Is there a reason why you don’t want to tell me more about how your lovely ass feels this morning?”

Maddox winked at him and grinned. “Yeah. If we’re going to talk about my ass, one thing might lead to another, and we might not go for a walk at all.”

Jonathan looked at him, blushed for a second, but then his eyes lit up. However, he chose to turn his attention back to his plate and play with his fork. “I’m crazy about you, Maddox,” he said so quietly that Maddox almost missed it.

That was so close to a full-on confession, right? But maybe, Jonathan meant it only as a sexual thing, and Maddox now had some tough work cut out for himself. There were no minced words between them when it came to their maddening sexual attraction, for sure. But there was more to it; Maddox was certain.

Maybe he was supposed to reply with a confession of his own. How could he put into words what he felt? He stole a quick look at Jonathan who continued to eat with elegant moves, his eyelashes dropping now and then, casting tiny shadows on his aristocratic cheekbones. While doing the most mundane things, he still managed to look stunning.

*You’re so beautiful you make my heart ache.* But before he managed to get the words out, Rusty burst into the room, saving him from saying cringe-y stuff. “Are you eating without me?” he thundered, like Maddox and Jonathan committed some atrocity on him.

“There’s plenty left,” Jonathan replied. “I can fetch you a plate.”

Maddox grabbed his arm before he could get up from his chair. “He can fetch it himself.”

Rusty didn’t seem bothered by that at all and just grabbed the pan from the cooktop, eating directly from it with his fingers and while standing. “So, whatcha going to do all day?”

Maddox licked his lips and grinned at his bestie, making sure to show more teeth than usual. “Don’t tell me you want to tag along.”

Rusty squirmed a little under his pointed look. “Nah. I don’t want you to kick my ass.”

Good. Rusty was smart enough to know when not to push it.

“How long have you two been friends?” Jonathan asked.

“Since first day of high school,” Maddox said promptly. “Rusty was new in town. I showed him everything.”

Rusty snickered. “Not everything. That chick Andrea showed me a lot more.”

“Like what?” Maddox asked.

“The moon,” Rusty replied and gestured with one hand to describe it as if the ceiling was suddenly the open sky.

“She rode you like a freaking pony,” Maddox said and laughed, as well. He stopped right away and stole a look at Jonathan. His boyfriend didn’t need to hear about Rusty’s crazy adventures, but Jonathan seemed amused and ready to hear more.

Rusty licked his fingers and then sucked them a little for good measure. “That is, if you usually ride a pony while it lies on its back.”

“She bragged to the entire school that she bagged the new guy,” Maddox said.

“She totally slut-shamed me. Told everyone I was easy,” Rusty said and sighed from the depths of his kinky soul.

“She slut-shamed you?” Jonathan asked and looked at Maddox for confirmation. “How, um, unconventional. What happened after that?”

Maddox could tell Jonathan was struggling to choose the right words. He didn’t have to worry so much, not when talking to Rusty, at least.

The kinkster brushed some rebellious strands of hair out of his eyes. “I took advantage of that. Girls came to me in throngs. I used to be called the Golden Tongue. Ah, the good ol’ times.”

Jonathan looked more and more shocked. “Did all of this happen in your first year of high school?”

Maddox exchanged a short look with Rusty, and they both burst into laughter. It wasn’t fair to their honorable guest to joke around like that. “Rusty became known as an awesome kisser, nothing more,” he explained. “Naughtier things than that happened a lot later. We’re from a very quiet town. Nothing too outrageous ever happens there.”

“There was that time when Mrs. Rogers walked outside all naked as a protest against furs,” Rusty reminded him.

“Yeah, but she was ninety. Everyone thought it made her happy, to be part of something important, you know.” He could tell from the corner of one eye that Jonathan was staring at him, not knowing what to think. “I’m kidding. The police took her home. But only after they guaranteed that the blanket they offered her was made of one hundred percent organic cotton obtained from sustainable sources.”

“Oh,” Jonathan barely managed. “Was it?”

“Was it what?” Maddox asked.

“Was it organic?” Jonathan insisted.

Oh, great, they were dragging the poor guy into their madness.

“Still, I was the first,” Rusty intervened, “to lose his virginity. Of all,” he added, gesturing enough to make it clear what he meant by that.

“He was,” Maddox confirmed. “Rusty likes to be first when it matters.”

“It’s good to have ambitions,” Jonathan said.

“And goals,” Rusty added. “That’s why I’m the king of Sunny Hill.”

“I thought you were the king of hookups,” Jonathan said. “Do the two positions overlap?”

Rusty shrugged. “It’s basically the same thing. I’m the most popular dude right now. Everybody wants to be me or be with me. In a word, the king. Two words,” he added, after a short deliberation with himself.

Jonathan chuckled and shook his head. The small dimples appearing on his cheeks made Maddox want to lean in and kiss him. What was stopping him, though? He smooched Jonathan’s cheek to make a point.

“Eww,” Rusty said in a playful tone, “why don’t you two get a room? Wait, wasn’t last night enough? I heard you showering at like two in the morning.”

“Enough? Yeah, right,” Maddox said and nuzzled Jonathan’s neck while he snuck his arms around his boyfriend.

“I’ve never tried kitchen sex,” Rusty continued his ramblings. “Let me know how that goes, ‘cause I’m out of here.”

Maddox sobered up right away. If he kept at it like that, Jonathan would only think that he was a horny dog who wanted nothing else. “We’re not having kitchen sex,” he declared. “We’re going out.”

“What are you going out to do?” Rusty wanted to know.

“Boyfriend things,” Maddox replied all matter-of-factly.

Rusty narrowed his eyes and examined him. “Meaning?” he asked, drawling the word slowly.

“You wouldn’t know,” Maddox said snappily. “You don’t have a boyfriend.”

“Yeah, yeah, brag about it now,” Rusty replied and stuck his tongue out. “Maybe I’ll get one just to piss you off.”

“You can’t piss me off. No one’s better than Jonathan.”

Jonathan wrapped his arm around his shoulders and shut him up with a kiss. “Let me do the dishes, and then we can go,” he suggested.

“Let’s leave Rusty to do the dishes,” Maddox suggested, but the last word barely left his mouth when Rusty vanished from the room at the speed of light. “That did it,” he said with satisfaction. “I’ll do the dishes,” he then offered generously. “But only if you kiss me again.”

Jonathan pressed their lips together softly and Maddox could feel him grinning against his mouth.

“You’re a very cheap dishwasher. Not even a quarter or anything.”

“I don’t think there are dishwashers working for quarters,” Maddox pointed out.

“There aren’t? I’d hire any that works for kisses, though.”

Their voices were dropping with each small kiss they gave each other.

“So lovey-dovey,” someone commented, and Maddox noticed Kane looking at them with stars in his eyes. And, of course, a good dose of something else telling him that soon enough they’d become the target for a variety of well-meant jokes.

This day was supposed to be about Jonathan and him. As much as he liked his friends, he didn’t want them butting in all the time. He had worked to get this day with Jonathan, and no one was going to take it away from him. As little as he knew about boyfriend things, one thing was certain; Jonathan would not be too judgmental about his lack of knowledge in the area. After all, they were both new to the boyfriend situation, which meant that they were on equal footing, and maybe he didn’t have to worry very much.

“Are we leaving the table like that?” Jonathan asked alarmed when Maddox began dragging him out of the room.

“Kane is in husband training. He’ll take care of it,” Maddox said cheerfully. He patted his friend on the shoulder. “Won’t you, Kane? Louise will love to hear about how good you are at washing dishes.”

No surprise, Kane made a face like he had just been offered to lick half a lemon, but he winked at Maddox and gave him the thumbs-up when they moved past him.

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“So, what do you think? Do I have the approval of your friends?” Jonathan asked once they were inside the car. He tried to keep his voice light and playful, but both curiosity and a particular need to be accepted prompted him to ask the question.

“You do, but it wouldn’t have mattered even if you hadn’t gotten it,” Maddox said while kicking the engine into gear.

Jonathan couldn’t stop admiring the surety of Maddox’s movements, the way his strong hands rested against the wheel.

“You’re not saying anything, and you’re also staring,” Maddox said. “What’s on your mind? I’ll kick Rusty’s ass if he got you upset or something.”

“No, no,” Jonathan hurried to deny, “nothing like that. This day feels so surreal, though. It’s like any moment I might just wake up.”

Maddox smiled and stole a quick look at him. He was a responsible driver, his eyes always on the road. Jonathan wondered briefly if starting a conversation of the magnitude he was considering was a good idea.

“Well, don’t tell Xpress, but you basically popped Mad Dawg’s cherry last night.”

Jonathan hid his face in his palms, not because he felt like laughing but because he feared that his face might give away a little too much. “I did, didn’t I?” he muttered under his breath.

“And it was, oh, damn,” Maddox continued, “totally awesome.”

“How--” Jonathan stopped and reconsidered the question. “No regrets, then?” he opted for a lighter version of what was really on his mind.

Maddox shrugged. “Nope. You worked me like a pro.”

“Come on, you’re just saying that,” Jonathan protested. “I had no idea what I was doing.”

“My ass is kind of sore,” Maddox admitted, “but otherwise, I feel super-duper. That can only mean one thing.”

“What thing is that?” Jonathan demanded to know.

“That you excel in more than your studies. You practically made me realize that I like it in the butt.”

Jonathan snickered and threw a brief look at Maddox. He looked so pretty, a few strands of hair getting in his eyes, a big smile on his face, and that naughty glint that told an entire story of its own. “Hmm, it’s great to have confirmation. So, was I good?”

“Are you going to fish for compliments all day long? You gave it to me good,” Maddox said. “So good that I can barely sit. Is that enough for you to stop pestering me about my ass?”

Ah, so the mighty Mad Dawg – Jonathan was sure the world at Sunny Hill would turn upside-down if Xpress ever caught a whiff of the true story behind that nickname – was a bit shy about having put his ass up despite his bravado.

“I won’t pester you anymore,” Jonathan promised.

Maddox seemed to consider the offer. “Nah, you can do it. I’m just not used to it.”

“And by it, do you mean the--” Jonathan stopped to rack his brain for a correct term.

“Butt fucking?” Maddox supplied right away.

“Yeah, that,” Jonathan admitted.

“If you don’t mind getting me used to it, then I won’t mind you pestering me either,” Maddox promised.

Jonathan felt a small, yet now familiar, flutter in his chest. So, it had been good. Maddox was open and always saying what he truly thought, but it was also true that he, Jonathan, wanted to hear as many reassurances as his boyfriend could possibly give him.

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“Do you remember what happened the last time we were here?” Maddox asked as they walked by the side of the lake.

It was a bit chilly, even though the day was fine, and there was no cloud in sight. Jonathan took Maddox’s hand and put it, along with his, into the pocket of his long coat. He had done it without thinking, but Maddox had found it completely natural and moved closer, falling in step with him as they went.

“It would be hard to forget,” he replied. “It didn’t happen that long ago.”

“Ah, and I thought you were going to say that it was too unforgettable,” Maddox said and pouted.

Jonathan stopped for a moment to face Maddox. He caught his cheek and leaned in to kiss the pouty lips. “There, better?” Maddox nodded with enthusiasm and smiled. “It was unforgettable.”

*Although I bet you’ve had people kneeling like that in front of you before.* Jonathan began walking again. If his mind took a break from negative thinking once in a blue moon, he would be so happy. What more could he want? Last night had come as a confirmation that Maddox wanted

him just as much as he wanted Maddox. And that, the thing they had done together, wasn't anything like others had done with the so-called bad boy of Sunny Hill in the past.

"Losing yourself in your head again?" Maddox's voice pulled him back.

"A little."

"Will you tell me something about you?" Maddox asked.

"Sure." It was only fair.

"What's your family like?"

Jonathan pondered for a moment. He knew a few things about Maddox's family, and it was only fair that he disclose something about his own. "Very different from your family."

"How so?"

"First of all, I'm an only child. Thinking back, I believe I had quite a lonely childhood."

"Didn't you have friends?"

"Other children visited, yes. But, usually, they came with their families from various places, and the friendships I struck up with them were short-lived."

"How about school? Didn't you have friends there?"

Jonathan pursed his lips. Would Maddox understand? Here, in the real world, people with a history like his had to be an oddity. "Not many, I guess. I was mostly a teachers' pet, so to speak. That didn't exactly endear me to the rest of the student body." He had enjoyed studying ever since he was a kid. And, at first, the appreciation he got from teachers had made him happy, giving him the confidence he was doing the right thing.

"Come on, for real? Are you trying to tell me that none of those boys saw how awesome you are?"

"They just tried to get under my skin. I was lucky that they weren't very good at it. I disliked it," he admitted in all honesty. "The schools I went to," he explained, "they didn't have many students. For me, coming to Sunny Hill was a bit of a shock. So many young people in one place, it's pretty amazing to see, you know?"

No, Maddox didn't know. He could try to imagine, at best.

"You sound like you've just stepped out of the pages of some Victorian novel," Maddox said.

"And all that was because you got good grades?"

“It wasn’t only that,” Jonathan continued. “My family is very affluent in the area where I live... lived. My father is well known and the kind of person people with ambitions want in their corner. Maybe it was my fault, but I saw anyone trying to approach me as one of those visitors my father got, coming to him to ask for this or that. And it didn’t help that before middle school, my parents tried to home school me exclusively.”

A child’s sensibilities didn’t make a good topic of conversation, but Maddox seemed really interested, his face open as he took in the information Jonathan offered.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Jonathan added. “When I was little, I thought those boys I went to school with really wanted to be my friends. But I overheard plenty of the things they said to each other, and I understood quite quickly that they mostly saw me as a rival or someone their families ordered them to have as a friend. I suppose kids in general are not crazy about such things.”

Maddox let out a short sigh. “So, they didn’t bother to get to know you.”

“Something like that,” Jonathan admitted. “It all became worse when I went to high school. Alliances and loyalties were already formed. I wasn’t one of them. If younger kids didn’t like to be told that someone was better than they were, imagine what teenagers thought about it all.”

“What about Drew?”

It was only natural for Maddox to want to hear about him. Jonathan mulled over what to say, trying to choose the right words. Honesty was the best choice. “I thought myself in love with him at first sight.”

“He wasn’t one of those fellows who’d hated you since middle school, right?”

“No, he was new.” That had been part of the appeal, without a doubt.

“What does he look like?”

Jonathan stopped for a moment and searched Maddox’s face. “Nothing like you, in case you’re worrying about it.”

“Good to know,” Maddox replied, completely unfazed. “But I still want to know what he looks like.”

“All right, if you’re so insistent.” Jonathan closed his eyes to recall the face he had promised himself to forget forever. “His hair is very light in color,” he began. It had felt like spun silk under his fingers.

“Good. ‘Cause my hair is very dark,” Maddox pointed out decisively.

Jonathan couldn’t keep from smiling and glancing at his boyfriend. “Are you comparing yourself to him? Is that what you’re aiming at by asking me about him?”

“No,” Maddox said a bit too quickly for that to be the truth. “But I need to make sure that I’m nothing like him.”

“You’re nothing like him,” Jonathan said matter-of-factly.

“Continue,” Maddox insisted. “What kind of eyes does he have?”

“Blue.” They made him seem so innocent, so far removed from anyone Jonathan had ever known before.

“Hmph,” Maddox made a sound of displeasure.

“I really don’t get you,” Jonathan said and stopped again. This time, he disentangled his hand from Maddox’s so that he could cup his boyfriend’s cheeks and give him a kiss. “Trust me, if he were to sit by your side, not only would he come up short in every way possible, but no one, absolutely no one, would be able to see anyone other than you.”

“If he were to sit by my side, I’d punch him in the face,” Maddox said directly.

“Oh, you’d punch him? I suppose there must be some truth about that Mad Dawg persona Xpress writes about on their slow days, huh?”

“You talk about him as if you still think he’s beautiful.”

Jonathan groaned in despair. “I had a feeling you’d drag me into something like this with these questions. Can you imagine what it is like to be me and realize that I could never compare to your well-endowed ex-lovers?” To make a point, he made a gesture to indicate large breasts sprouting out of his chest.

Maddox pulled back a little, stared at him, and then started laughing. “I don’t care about that stuff. But it’s funny to see you a bit jealous. Plus,” he said and pulled Jonathan close and snuck one hand inside his coat, “lately, it looks like I have it bad for hard pecs.”

“You do?” Jonathan asked slowly as if he couldn’t believe that to be the truth.

“I’d fondle yours right now to convince you, but it’s cold, and I still want to know more about that asshole.”

“Fine,” Jonathan agreed with a sigh. “What else do you want to know? But promise me that you’re not going to use it as fuel for some unfathomable insecurity of yours.”

Maddox puffed out his chest. “Like I’d be insecure.”

Of course, what reason did he have to be that? Jonathan had to agree with him. “All right. Go on, ask me.”

“What made you fall for him?” Maddox asked, taking him by surprise.

That wasn’t easy to explain. “I suppose the fact that we were both outsiders helped us bond,” he started. “And he was just that kind, you know. The kind that doesn’t give a damn about rules and whatnot.”

“The bad boy,” Maddox suggested.

“You can call it that. It felt liberating for me. Finally, I had someone to talk to, really talk to, not just carry on superficial conversations with, and he was offering me confirmation that all that I thought to be wrong with my life was, indeed, wrong.” He stopped for a moment and closed his eyes as he recalled those times. “I thought I was getting out of prison for a breath of fresh air when no one was looking, but I was only taking an allowed pleasure walk within its walls and nothing more.”

“Brr,” Maddox said and shook his body like he was suddenly cold. “There should be laws against putting kids in schools like that.”

“Maybe I’m just too sensitive. God only knows how many times my father berated me for falling short of expectations. I suppose that many others thrive in that kind of environment. Maybe it just wasn’t for me.”

“Don’t make it your fault,” Maddox warned him. “Did Drew ever kiss you?”

Jonathan didn’t hide his surprise at the question. “Is it important?”

Maddox nodded. “Totally.”

“He did. Each time he wanted something,” Jonathan added quietly.

“You kiss really well. Did you practice on him?”

Jonathan hooked his arm over Maddox’s shoulders. “Not as much as you’d think. And I’d rather be practicing with you.”

“Really? What for?” Maddox teased. “You’ve got a perfect score already.”

“Even so, you know what they say. If you don’t use it, you lose it.”

“In that case, use it a little more.” Maddox was the one to pull him close and kiss him.

“It’s so beautiful out here,” Jonathan commented as soon as his lips were released. “Is the lake open to swimming in summer?”

“As soon as it gets warm enough, there’ll be plenty of guys and gals taking over the place for skinny-dipping,” Maddox replied. “I can barely wait to come here with you again.”

“Ah, too bad you told me I’m not allowed on the beach,” Jonathan teased.

“This isn’t the beach,” Maddox said promptly. “And there are also wetsuits, you know? The kind that cover you all over.”

“They’re very tight, though,” Jonathan pointed out.

Maddox frowned as he searched for a solution. It took him long enough that Jonathan decided to come to his rescue. “You’re cute when you’re jealous. But, trust me, no one else would ever look at me the way you look at me.”

An incredulous snort followed. “That’s what you think.”

“So, what would you like to do next? It’s a bit chilly outside,” Jonathan said, changing tack.

“Some more boyfriend things,” Maddox said promptly.

“Like what?” Jonathan asked.

Maddox seemed to ponder over the answer. “I really don’t know,” he replied and deflated right away. “As much as I think, I can only come up with sex stuff.”

Jonathan laughed. “I have some ideas. Do you trust me?”

“You fucked my ass. Sure thing I trust you.”

“Then let me take you somewhere for a change.”

Maddox snuck his hand inside his. “Let’s do it, then. Boyfriend,” he added for good measure.

Jonathan smiled. He didn’t mind being reminded of that. Maddox could repeat the word as many times as he liked, and he would never get bored hearing it.

## *Chapter Twenty-Nine – The Perfect Date*

Maddox stared at Jonathan for a moment, questioning him with his eyes, after parking the car behind an old building, square in shape and pretty much nondescript. Jonathan smiled and kissed him briefly on the cheek. “While I was getting acquainted with the area, I’ve got to know some people,” he explained.

Someone came out of the building and threw some bags into the dumpsters lining the wall. Jonathan opened the door and called to the woman who immediately waved back, a large smile lighting her face.

“Hey, Jonny, long time, no see,” she said as she walked closer. “Sorry if I don’t give you a hug but I’m on garbage duty, and you’re so nicely dressed.” She peeked inside the car, her eyes full of curiosity. She couldn’t be older than fifty, and her light blue eyes made her seem even younger. Her hair was covered by a black plastic cap, but a few strands of blonde hair had somehow managed to escape from the confines of that improvised hat. The shapeless green gown she wore made it difficult to guess her figure, but the way she carried herself was enough for anyone looking to understand that she was used to pulling her own weight.

Maddox raised one hand and waved, still unsure of why they were there and who the woman was.

“Are you ready for some hard work or are you just passing by?” she asked after returning Maddox’s wave with the same good-natured attitude.

“I was wondering if you could use some extra pairs of hands,” Jonathan replied.

“Always,” she said cheerfully. “You know how it can get on Sundays around here.”

Jonathan looked at Maddox. “Are you coming?”

“Sure,” he confirmed and got out of the car.

“I see you got some help with you,” the woman said and looked Maddox up and down, while her eyes lit up even more.

“Marianne, this is my boyfriend, Maddox. Maddox, this is Marianne, one of the best kitchen helpers in the history of kitchens.”

“One of the best?” she asked, quirked an eyebrow in feigned offense.

“The best,” Jonathan hurried to confirm, playing along and faking some fear of retaliation at his misstep.

It took Maddox a few moments to realize what Jonathan had so nonchalantly just said. He grinned and hurried to his side, linking their hands together.

“Aren’t you boys a sight for sore eyes,” Marianne said with a dreamy sigh. “I’m sure happy to hear to you got yourself a boyfriend, Jonny. And such a handsome young fellow,” she added and a large sunny grin split her face in two. “Where did you find him?”

“We’re both going to Sunny Hill,” Jonathan explained. He made a discreet gesture with his chin that Maddox didn’t get right away. “Aren’t you supposed to say something, Maddox?” he asked and his eyes crinkled at the corners with amusement.

“Oh, shoot, right.” Maddox stretched out his hand. “Pleased to meet you, Marianne. I’m Maddox, Jonathan’s boyfriend,” he offered with emphasis.

She laughed good-naturedly as she waved to show that she couldn’t shake hands since she was wearing gloves. “No doubt about that,” she said. “Now, are you boys ready for the best soup kitchen from hell?”

“Don’t believe her,” Jonathan assured him. “They’re all salt of the earth here.”

Maddox felt the warm sensation in his chest spreading everywhere as Jonathan pulled him along, with Marianne leading the way inside. He was Jonathan’s boyfriend. It was such a simple wondrous thing that he wanted to shout it from the top of his lungs for all the world to hear.

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Inside, a flurry of activity, smells of spices, and steam rising from boiling pots welcomed them right away. Maddox didn’t know which way to look, as there were several people there moving around as part of a perfected choreography, chopping vegetables on sturdy wooden boards, washing dishes, or filling plates. Among them, a man in his late forties with skin that reminded Maddox of well-worn leather shouted orders now and then while moving from one station to another.

“Look what the cat dragged in, Jorge,” Marianne announced, somehow managing to make her voice rise above the din of the kitchen.

“Jonny!” Jorge exclaimed and pushed his white cap further up his head as it tried to fall over his bushy eyebrows. “You’ve been a stranger for too long. Studying hard?” He stole a glance at Maddox. “Who’s your friend?”

“His boyfriend,” Marianne said with self-importance and quickly as if she couldn’t bear for someone else to steal the honor of saying that from her.

“Handsome,” Jorge commented after measuring Maddox up and down in the same manner as his colleague before. “But is he any good at opening cans, I wonder?”

“Only one way to find out, right?” Marianne said happily while gesturing for Maddox and Jonathan to follow so that she could give them the right coveralls for the job.

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“How are you doing?” Jonathan asked, brushing by his shoulder and looking at his handiwork.

Through the course of only an hour, Maddox had been upgraded from opening cans of chopped tomatoes to peeling potatoes and then to cutting onions. Jonathan had been a busy bee, as well, but he appeared to have assumed the role of some sort of sous chef, if such terms applied to a soup kitchen. He was clearly Jorge’s favorite and immediately put in charge of the boiling pots, assessing them for spices and whatnot. Maddox had risked almost cutting himself a few times as he kept sneaking glances at his boyfriend and the man in charge, as they talked animatedly about various things. He caught a few tidbits of gossip that involved other volunteers that served in the kitchen, as well, such as someone waiting for a baby, and another moving to a different county.

“You taught me a few things, so I’m good,” he replied. “So, is it here that you learned how to cook?”

Jonathan smiled. “How could you tell?”

“You’re the chef’s pet,” Maddox pointed out.

That caused Jonathan to burst into laughter. “Jorge doesn’t necessarily consider himself a chef, but I think he’ll appreciate the thought.”

“Don’t tell him,” Maddox hurried to say. “He appears quick to anger, and those knives he wields look pretty damn long and sharp.”

“Come now,” Jonathan told him, taking him by the shoulders. “We deserve a bowl of hot soup.”

“But I’m not finished yet,” Maddox protested, pointing at the wooden board and half cut onion.

“Someone else will take over. Marianne can barely wait to interrogate you.”

Maddox let himself be guided away without another word of protest. This wasn’t a regular Sunday, but one of the tests that aimed at evaluating him as to how good he was at being Jonathan’s boyfriend. In a few words, his reputation was at stake.

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They sat at a small table in a separate room. At Marianne’s insistence, Maddox began eating. A groan of delight climbed up his throat before his brain even had the chance to realize what was going on.

“Isn’t food better when you make it?” Marianne asked and sank her spoon into her bowl.

“It could barely be said that I made it,” Maddox said. “I only peeled some potatoes.”

“Gorgeous and humble? Jonathan, are you sure your boyfriend didn’t descend on a ray of light?”

“Don’t praise him too much,” Jonathan joked. “It might go to his head.”

Maddox had a few things to say about that in protest but let it slide because Marianne appeared to have another question lined up for him.

“Jonny says that you come from a big family. Your momma must be a fantastic lady,” she said. “Are all your siblings as handsome as you?”

“People say so,” Maddox replied. “And most of us take after our father.”

Marianne wiggled her eyebrows. “I bet that whenever you go out with your brothers and sisters, you cause accidents everywhere you go.”

“That’s why we’re basically spread all over the place,” Maddox joked. “Only my oldest brother Vern works with mom and dad. He’ll get the construction company, they say, when they retire.”

Marianne nodded. Then she turned toward Jonathan. “He might not be the heir, but he’s still a good catch, Jonny.”

They all laughed at the same time.

“I’m not interested in a good catch, Marianne,” Jonathan said. “Much more in a good man,” he added and looked at Maddox with his eyes all luminous and warm.

“That’s me,” he said right away, making Marianne snicker again like a schoolgirl.

“I might have to take back the part about his being humble,” she remarked. “Dig in, boys. You’ve earned it.”

He could feel Jonathan’s eyes on him, so he turned his head so that their eyes would meet.

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“So, what did you think?” Jonathan asked as he put on the seatbelt. He tried to keep his voice light and steady, but it was important to know if Maddox enjoyed being put to work on a Sunday, and in a soup kitchen of all things.

“I’ve never been to a place like this. Have you been here many times? They sure thought you were one of them.”

Jonathan patted the seatbelt with his thumb as he adjusted it over his shoulder. “After I left home, I wanted to become more self-reliant. Of course, I had to be mindful of my expenses, so the route of enlisting for a cooking course with a master chef was out of the question.”

“Did your parents, you know, cut you off?” Maddox appeared to choose his words carefully.

Jonathan shook his head. “No. But I didn’t want to play some kind of game with them or allow them to play it with me. So, I only used what I had on my personal card to break away.”

“Sounds like a prison break, all right,” Maddox joked.

At the sound of his boyfriend’s playful voice, Jonathan always and almost instantly felt a heavy burden lifting from his chest. “I had to become practical and fast about a lot of things. It wasn’t easy, but, you know, think of me what you will, I did use that money. I intend to pay it back,” he added.

“You’re practical all right,” Maddox said. “You’re so smart, Jonathan, no joke. I doubt many people our age, still in college and all, could be as self-reliant as you. Plus, you do know how to cook. Your food is yummy, but you can’t tell me you learned it all here. You treated me and my friends to some seriously good meals. Like five stars and stuff.”

Jonathan chuckled. “I learned the basics here. And for everything else, there’s the internet.”

“Ah, right, I totally forgot about that,” Maddox joked.

Jonathan paused for a moment. “I don’t know a thing about what boyfriends do on Sundays,” he confessed. “But I wanted to show you off a little to the people I came to care about. I hope that’s okay with you.”

“Sure thing it is,” Maddox confirmed. “It’s making me mad happy to hear you introducing me as your boyfriend.”

“Well, that is, indeed, great to hear.”

“Where to now?”

Jonathan hesitated but only for a moment. “I know just the place. Just one thing, Maddox. In case you hate anything, anything at all, you won’t hesitate to tell me, will you?”

A snort followed his question. “Like I’d hate anything you showed me.”

That was enough of a confirmation. “All right, then. But if you start judging me--” he started on a playful tone.

“Hmm, something of how mischievously you smile right now tells me I’m going to be in for a bit of a shock. Are we going to visit some fine establishment where gentlemen who prefer leather accessories choose to hang out?”

Maddox could be so funny, with his exaggerated accent and implied references to certain sexual fetishes. Jonathan shook his head. “Nothing as adventurous as that, I assure you.”

“Ah, too bad.”

For a moment, Jonathan thought he could hear real disappointment in Maddox's words. It wasn't possible; it had to be nothing but his imagination. And yet, the flash of an image, with Maddox obediently bowing his head to receive a collar crossed his mind.

He cursed at himself inwardly. What was wrong with him? They barely had so-called vanilla sex. It had to be because Maddox was so sexy that he wouldn't mind putting him in chains just to see how good they looked on him.

"Jonathan," Maddox drawled slowly.

"Hmm," he said and turned his head. "What is it?"

"You were spacing out with this funny, no, not funny, but like thirsty look in your eyes, and you were biting your lower lip--"

"Just let me add the destination," Jonathan said quickly and reached for the GPS. "No peeking. You'll know what it is when we get there."

Damn, he had almost been caught. In the future, he needed to keep his fantasies in check a lot better than that.

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They found two seats after some fumbling about and almost tripping over a few people. Jonathan gestured for Maddox to take a seat and sat by his right. By mere accident and because the seats were pretty narrow, he ended up resting his left hand on Maddox's thigh. "Sorry about that," he murmured and attempted to pull his hand away but Maddox caught his arm and forced it back where it had just been.

"Why did we have to show ID to watch a play for kids?" Maddox whispered.

"Just watch," Jonathan said.

He had seen the play before, and because of the different twist and edge put to this particular indie production, he wanted to hear Maddox's opinion. Also, there was a secret desire he didn't want to admit out loud that Maddox wouldn't mind other aspects of what it meant to be together, two men in a relationship that some still might not agree with.

At Sunny Hill, gay people were definitely not seen as personae non gratae, but it was one thing to walk hand in hand on campus or places where there was no one else, and another to be out in public. Jonathan hated to think that he was testing Maddox, but in a way, he was doing exactly that. Was it wrong to want so much so fast? Maybe he was greedy.

*Why don't you curb your enthusiasm already?*

How unfortunate that he could still remember fragments of conversations that felt as if they happened in another life. Each time he had tried to get Drew to commit to something more than their secret rendezvous, at least for the future if not the present, he had been met with annoyance and downright scolding for wanting too much.

“Those guys are supposed to be fashion influencers?” Maddox asked.

“Yes, good catch,” Jonathan replied. It was a modern reenactment of an old story, but the moral was just the same.

“They do have good taste in clothes,” Maddox commented as the two actors playing fashionistas fussed around the high-status socialite in an effort to convince him that their clothes were better than Gucci and Armani together.

“The best is yet to come,” Jonathan said and leaned closer to caress Maddox’s ear with his lips. A girl sitting in front of them had just turned around, probably ready to admonish them for ruining the play.

Finally, the empty-headed socialite stood up from his chair and ordered the two influencers to follow him behind a transparent divider screen. Jonathan didn’t care about keeping his eyes on the stage as he knew what was going on, but he watched Maddox as the guy took in the action with growing interest.

“I kind of get it why they asked for our IDs,” Maddox whispered. “They look like they’re undressing him. Aren’t they a bit too touchy even for a pair of influencers? I bet that guy got enough groping for like a year in the span of five minutes.”

One of the fashionistas walked out from behind the divider and announced that the socialite was ready to present his new clothes. Then he folded away the screen and the socialite was exposed to the public while striking a pose.

A collective gasp erupted from the audience. But it was Maddox who basically dotted the i. “That guy is all naked and shit,” he exclaimed loudly.

Everyone turned toward their seats and the next moment burst into laughter.

“The voice of innocence,” one patron called and whistled.

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They were still laughing when they walked outside. Maddox declared himself proud to become part of the play, albeit unintentionally. “I see,” he said in a shrewd tone, “you want me to get into the alternative lifestyle.”

“Am I succeeding?” Jonathan leaned against his shoulder, bumping into him. Maddox pretended to lose his balance, just to have the satisfaction of seeing Jonathan quickly reach for him and hook one arm over his shoulders.

“Maddox and Jonathan,” an unfamiliar voice said, and they both stopped at the same time.

Maddox looked a bit confused at the trio of girls in front of him. They had their hair styled in the same fashion, parted in the middle and allowed to hang loose and long over their shoulders. Something of their features made him think of library mice, and all three pushed their glasses up their noses at the same time. Even the way they dressed made them look uncannily similar. “Do we know you, guys?” he asked directly.

“We’re going to Sunny Hill, too,” they said at the same time. Maddox stared at them, wondering if and how copy-paste worked in the real world.

“Ah, cool. Did you see the play?”

“Yeah. Totally worth it.” Only one of them spoke this time, making things just a little bit less spooky. “And your reaction was totally priceless.” She smiled at him, showing rows of small sharp teeth. Maddox blinked a couple of times, trying to place these girls.

“I might be made for that scene, what can I say?” Maddox said with a shrug.

“And you, Jonathan?” The same girl turned toward Jonathan, finally paying him some attention.

“I also saw the play,” Jonathan said smoothly.

“I wasn’t asking that,” she said in a sharp, annoying voice. “Are you also made for acting?”

“No, I doubt it. I have no skills whatsoever that would help me in such a career choice.”

“Too bad.” She stuffed her large jacket pockets with her hands and bounced on her heels. “I would have sworn you were made for the screen.”

Maddox frowned and stared the girl up and down. There was something funny about her, but not in a fun way. The way she spoke was somewhat mechanical and too thought over if that was a thing.

“We’d love to stay and chat some more, but we have other places to be,” she said quickly. “See you in school, Maddox and Jonathan.”

He stared after them for several seconds, until Jonathan pulled him along.

“Is it just me, or are those chicks kind of weird?”

“You’ve been at Sunny Hill a lot longer than I have. You should know them better.”

“Not at all. I mean, I might have seen them around, but I wouldn’t bet on it. Plus, do you think they’re triplets?”

“I was wondering the same thing,” Jonathan confirmed. “I mean, they looked awfully similar, didn’t they? However, I think that they’re not entirely identical. I don’t know a lot of things about triplets, though.”

Maddox shrugged. “Whatever, it’s not important. They weirded me out a little, to be honest. Do you have other things on your list that you want to show me?”

Jonathan winked at him and bit his lower lip. “There is something I’ve always wanted to try, and since you have a car--”

“Say no more,” Maddox said right away and dragged him toward the parking lot. “Does this something include us parking in an area that’s not anywhere near civilization?”

“I wouldn’t go as far as that,” Jonathan replied. “But remote and off the beaten path, that should work.”

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Maddox hadn’t been the only one weirded out by those strange girls, but Jonathan didn’t plan on dwelling on random details and words when he still had some of Sunday left to blow Maddox’s mind.

He felt particularly daring and not at all like his usual self, especially today. It wasn’t only because last night had been amazing, and Maddox had offered him a lot more than he had ever hoped for. No, there was also this energy inside him claiming part of his sanity because clearly, he wanted to do something risky and sexy with his boyfriend.

Maddox stopped the car and looked at him with eyes full of mischief. “Well, is it car sex you want to try? And we practically have done some things out in the open so--”

Jonathan stopped him with a kiss. “Not exactly sex. I mean, according to the definition, it is still--”

“As long as it involves a dick and a hole, it’s sex,” Maddox stated. “As long as one of them belongs to you, and one to me, we’re good.”

Jonathan laughed. “All right. Then it’s sex.” He leaned in and kissed Maddox slowly while he began working the guy’s fly. He opened his eyes, looking around to make sure that they weren’t in an area where they could be spotted.

“Let me,” Maddox said and reached for his crotch.

Jonathan batted his hand away. “You keep your hands on the wheel.”

“What? So you want me to pretend that I’m driving? Or drive for real?”

Jonathan stopped. “No, that would be crazy and dangerous.”

“I’d die a happy man,” Maddox said with a broad grin.

Jonathan rolled his eyes and then looked at his boyfriend. “Too bad I want you in good health for a long time,” he said dryly. “Just keep your hands on the wheel and look ahead while letting me do my thing.”

“Hmm, your thing,” Maddox purred. “What’s that?”

Jonathan didn’t dally. Maddox was clearly anticipating what would follow, and his beautiful cock was hard as a rock. As he moved his hand up and down slowly at a teasing pace, Jonathan took in Maddox’s expression, saw how his lips parted letting out a soft exhalation.

How could he be so lucky to land someone like that? Sometimes, it still felt like he was dreaming. He adjusted his position so that he could cup Maddox’s heavy balls and place a small kiss on top of them.

“You’re spoiling me,” Maddox whispered.

“Would you like me to stop?” Jonathan began to lick them slowly, taking one, then the other in his mouth.

“No way. You do your thing,” Maddox shot back quickly.

Jonathan moved to the main course and took the leaking head between his lips. Maddox maybe thought this was a favor Jonathan was doing for him, but it was the other way around. It was crazy to admit it out loud, but he was mad about Maddox’s body, every inch of it, and especially this part. He looked up, expecting to see Maddox with his head tipped back and his eyes closed. But no, Maddox was looking at him, and the look in his pretty eyes was so intense it made Jonathan feel his chest expanding to the point of choking him.

“You look ahead,” Jonathan ordered. He didn’t issue any threat with that, but Maddox immediately obeyed.

Without explicitly saying the words, he was begging for control. Maddox behaved like it was completely normal to give it away. With Drew, it had always been a fight, a push and pull, but nothing like that happened now. Maddox let out small huffs and groans of pleasure as Jonathan caressed the tip with his lips. He was all practiced ease when it came to these things, but he still felt like everything was new.

The right partner made all of the difference. Jonathan looked at Maddox now and then, exhilarated to see that his commands were followed to the letter. Good behavior had to be rewarded, and he helped himself with one hand while he took Maddox deeper and faster.

Later, as he straightened up in his seat, he could sense the gray eyes searching for something as they took him in. "What is it?" he asked in a ragged whisper. "Was it bad?"

Maddox caressed his nape slowly. "No. You're pretty frigging awesome."

"That should be my line."

"Nope. Mine. You've mastered the art of blowjobs to perfection. They should have your name in the dictionary of sex."

"I wouldn't dream of it. Rusty might get jealous."

Maddox snickered at the mention of his friend's name. "Yeah, totally. He might just start sucking dick just to prove that he's better even at that."

"Let's not provoke him," Jonathan suggested. "Ready to go back now?"

Maddox brushed their noses together and kissed him. "Not really. But since you're sexy ordering me around, if you say so, I'll obey."

"I had no idea you could be so submissive," Jonathan said, closing his eyes and enjoying Maddox's playful kisses.

"Maybe you should get it, then. By the way, babe, this was totally the perfect date."

"Babe," Jonathan drawled.

"Ah, right, that's not working for you."

"It actually does," he said quickly. "Let's go home. It's going to be a tough week."

"Yeah," Maddox confirmed. "It's always a tough week when I don't get to see you much."

Jonathan smiled and looked away. Neither of them fell short in the compliment and innuendo department, it seemed. That had to be the main ingredient of a perfect date.

### *Chapter Thirty – What You Don't Know Makes You More Curious*

Ray grinned all-knowingly and wiggled his eyebrows while Jonathan tried to focus on his textbooks. One could only do so much to ignore a curious roommate slash self-proclaimed BFF. Not that he had any qualms about that, and Ray was the first and only BFF he had ever had. On top of it all, he was very grateful to have a friend like that. Nonetheless, the unspoken questions that floated in the air made it a less than ideal environment for studying and also unnerved him a little.

“Is there something on your mind, Ray?” he asked, without pulling his eyes away from his study materials.

“People say you’re getting married,” Ray whispered, his eyes darting around like he was expecting someone to jump on them while they were safely tucked away in the kitchen of their dorm room.

Jonathan ignored his self-imposed rule of trying not to give in to the temptation of indulging Ray in his latest obsession with current gossip and looked up in utter shock. “Married?”

Ray burst into laughter. “Glad I got your attention. No, no one says you’re getting married.”

“Well,” Jonathan straightened up in his chair, “you surely have my attention now. What is it?” They were supposed to be studying together, but it looked as if Ray was like a kid with a new toy which he was dying to show to others.

“Are you going home for Thanksgiving?”

The question took him by surprise. He felt his body stiffen up and grabbed his pen, while his eyes moved over the open textbook in front of him, in search of answers. “I haven’t yet given it proper thought.” He had tried. Even if they didn’t reach out to him, that didn’t mean he should maintain the silent war between them. He wouldn’t go back to being under their thumb, but he didn’t want to ignore them forever either.

“I was thinking,” Ray said, completely unfazed by his lack of enthusiasm regarding the quickly approaching short vacation. “How about you come home with me to meet my folks?”

Jonathan stared at his roommate. Ray’s face was an open book, and he was waiting for an answer. “Thank you for inviting me,” he replied. “But I should seriously think about visiting my family.”

Ray nodded sympathetically. “Sure thing. But if you change your mind, just let me know.”

Jonathan fiddled with his pen. Things such as inviting friends over for Thanksgiving were normal, but why were they such an alien notion for him? “Are you sure your parents wouldn’t

mind? I'm a stranger," he pointed out. And he doubted Ray's family had a guesthouse where people who visited them on occasion could stay.

"Pfft," Ray made a strange sound and smacked his lips, "what stranger? I told mom and dad everything about you. My mom can barely wait to make you slave in the kitchen with her. She wants to see the miracle of a college boy going beyond the boiling of an egg."

Jonathan laughed and shook his head. "So, it's all a ploy to get me in your parents' kitchen."

"You can say that. But, jokes aside, JJ, you're really welcome if you want. And it can even be a short-notice thing, like right before we have to go out the door and head to the airport."

Jonathan couldn't remember feeling so touched by another human being ever before. Ray had zero obligations toward him; everything he did, he did because of the goodness in his heart, and that meant a lot. "Thank you, Ray," he said quietly.

As much as he seemed an airhead more often than not, Ray had proven once more that he was more attuned to other people's feelings than most people. He reached over the table and squeezed Jonathan's hand briefly. "It's the least I can do for your not letting me die of starvation. Mom is even certain I gained some weight." He leaned back into his chair and stretched his t-shirt over his ribs.

Jonathan pursed his lips not to laugh. "Yeah, I'm sure. One more bite and we might have to find a dorm room with a bigger door."

Ray huffed in disbelief. "Make fun all you want. I'm sure I finally put some meat on my bones. Hanna thinks so, too."

"Ah, well, if Hanna says so, who am I to say otherwise? Now let's study, or else."

"Or else what?" Ray asked with emphasis to show that he wasn't scared.

"I'll put us on a diet. Keto. Raw. All that," Jonathan joked while burying his head in his books to hide his grin.

"Eww, no," Ray decided. "I don't even know what keto is, but raw doesn't sound too good."

"You eat raw fruits and vegetables all the time," Jonathan pointed out.

"Yeah, but not raw meat." Ray pondered for a bit. "Unless it's sushi. Does that count?"

"Study, or no pizza," Jonathan threatened. It didn't work to be subtle with Ray. His roommate had a special skill for wriggling himself out of any situation.

"No pizza?! All right, tyrant," Ray mumbled and finally turned his attention to his books. "But if we get through our mid-terms with flying colors, you make sure to add some extra toppings."

“Cross my heart,” Jonathan promised.

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Maddox stretched and yawned. He was done studying for the day, but he didn't feel like going to sleep already. For a while, he toyed with the idea of sexting Jonathan, but the guy's major was definitely a lot harder than his, and as a responsible boyfriend, he needed to let him study. He realized that he needed to pay more attention to his obligations, too, and not only the fun parts.

Thinking of which, he realized, there was something part fun part obligation he hadn't done in a while, which was to pester Rusty to study. The kinkster was lucky to be gifted by nature in the smarts department, but some things couldn't be navigated by wits alone. Maddox had already heard Kane warning Rusty to study so that he didn't flunk like an idiot.

He walked out of the room and knocked energetically on Rusty's door. He had heard him earlier, and it wasn't possible for him to be asleep already. “Go away,” the familiar voice of his friend called from behind the door in an exasperated tone.

Maddox grinned and knocked louder. He couldn't exactly explain why, but sometimes pestering and teasing Rusty felt incredibly rewarding. Maybe it was because the kinkster could be convinced to do the right thing now and then, and when he did something, he never did it by half. Maddox shared Kane's opinion that Rusty was some sort of closet genius, and it was one of his secret vows that he would make it come out, eventually.

“I will strangle you with a sock and then make you eat it,” Rusty called again.

Maddox was about to knock for the third time, when the door was yanked open abruptly, and he found himself face to face with his bestie. Rusty's eyes were red-rimmed and his hair was a mess.

One possibility was that Rusty's room was full of girls of various shapes and sizes, which explained why the guy was in such bad shape.

The other possibility, the undesirable one, was that Rusty had gotten into another ugly and conflictual conversation with one of his parents. Maddox's bet was on the asshole absent father, but Rusty's mom was also difficult to deal with, as well.

“Rusty, come back to bed,” a feminine voice whined.

Good, it was the first guess, Maddox thought and sighed in relief. “I didn't know you were busy, man, my bad.” He made a move to go back to his room, but Rusty caught his shoulder and dragged him back.

“Say I gotta study and shit,” Rusty whispered in his ear.

Nothing like a buddy to save you from a bad hookup. That was one of Rusty's wise quotes, and Maddox believed that he knew why the guy lived by them. Therefore, he played along. "Rusty, you fucking piece of shit," he said loudly, "why the fuck aren't you studying right now?"

Rusty threw him a pointed look and gestured for him to up the ante. Maddox pondered for a moment. What the hell worse insults could he come up with? Rusty and his weird ideas.

"You're one bad grade away from finding yourself a bum on the street," Maddox continued.

Rusty put his hands on his hips and gave him a disapproving stare. Maddox hunched his shoulders and stared back, at a loss of what was needed of him. Rusty rolled his eyes, grabbed one of his hand and put it on his own shoulder. Then, using Maddox's hand, he pushed himself back into the room while staring wide-eyed at him.

"That's it!" Maddox exclaimed, filled with righteous, yet fake, indignation. "You're going to start studying right now or there will be consequences!"

Rusty mouthed at him, 'what consequences?'

"I'm going to fuck you up so badly," Maddox said, "you won't be able to sit for a week!"

Rusty finally offered him a quick satisfied grin and then schooled his face into a seriously frightened look. For a moment, Maddox lost his composure; Rusty knew so well how to change his expression at the drop of a hat that unless people knew him very well, they easily bought into his act.

"Maddox," the girl squealed from the bed, "leave Rusty alone!"

He had failed to notice how Rusty had surreptitiously moved his hand from the shoulder to his throat, and now it looked like he was strangling his buddy. "No can do, darling," he said. "This fucker needs to study, and unless you're not squeamish about seeing blood, I suggest you take a hike."

That seemed enough to convince the girl of how serious he was about those threats, because she jumped half-naked from the bed and quickly grabbed the rest of her clothes.

They remained unmoving like extras for a photoshoot while she ran out of the room. Only after they heard her rushing down the stairs did Maddox dropped his arm. Rusty began laughing like an idiot.

"You're such a fucking ass," Maddox whispered to him.

Rusty waved and plopped down on the messed up bed. "Thank God, she's gone. You don't have to whisper. Phew, that was some bad shit. Remind me not to hook up again with the heroine chick look."

“I think it’s actually heroin chic,” Maddox corrected him.

Rusty made a gesture like he had it up to his neck. “This one wanted to convince me to go vegan, but only after sacrificing a goat at midnight and drinking its blood.”

“You’re full of shit.” Maddox crossed his arms and stared at his friend with a critical eye. “And let me open a fucking window. Did you two sacrifice the goat in here already?”

Rusty laughed and rolled around on the bed like the naughty kid he was. Maddox shook his head and opened the window. It wasn’t goat or anything, but that chick was probably high on something that smelled pretty funky. Maddox didn’t exactly feel bad about sending her on her way with their little act.

“Thanks, man. You helped me dodge a bullet right there.”

“Sure. By the way, I’m here because I actually want to make you study. That was no joke,” Maddox warned him.

“I’m not going to study,” Rusty drawled.

Maddox was sure his friend was testing him right now. That meant Rusty was more restless than usual and needed some putting in his place. “You look like warmed over shit. You need to shower and get that head in order,” Maddox said in what he hoped was a no-nonsense tone.

“I’m too blasé for all of that,” Rusty replied and made a sweeping circle with one arm through the air as if it suddenly conveyed his current state of Baudelairean spleen.

“Blasé? Since when do you use such words?” Maddox questioned him.

Rusty gave him an offended look. “What? Only Jonathan can talk fancy like that?”

“I have yet to hear him use the word blasé in casual conversation,” Maddox pointed out. “Don’t tell me you suddenly want to cosplay as Jonathan.”

Rusty shrugged. “He’s a good character.”

“He’s my boyfriend,” Maddox said curtly. “Leave him out of your weird cosplay shit.”

The heartfelt sigh that followed wasn’t enough to convince him of the kinkster’s good intentions.

“Do I have to drag you to the bathroom?”

Rusty stretched out an arm as if he was on his deathbed. “Yes, please.”

Maddox shrugged. Well, that was what people got for being friends with Rusty. On the other hand, he was sure that the world would have been a much sadder place without people like that

in it. "Come here, bum," he said and hooked Rusty's arm over his shoulders to help him out of the bed.

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Rusty didn't protest while Maddox shampooed his hair and stayed there, kneeling inside the bathtub, his back to him, without saying a word. "Now, before you start suggesting something weird, I'm not going to wash your balls," Maddox said.

Kane used to say that having Rusty around was like having an overactive dog. Maddox couldn't say he saw any fault in what Kane said. He wasn't the only one who washed Rusty's hair like that on occasion. The only thing that came to him now, however, was how comfortable and uninterested he had always been around other naked guys. Only Jonathan did it for him, it seemed. Still, his eyes lingered for a moment over Rusty's back and his broad shoulders.

Rusty grunted in displeasure, but then he agreed. "Yes, boss."

"The things I do for you," Maddox commented. "You realize that tomorrow Xpress is going to write some stupid shit about how I turned into Mad Dawg again. That chick is going to say that I beat the crap out of you."

Rusty didn't seem affected by the gossip that was bound to flare up after their little stage act. "I can paint myself a black eye. Or two."

"Don't you dare," Maddox warned him and used the shower head to wash the shampoo out of Rusty's hair. He winced when Rusty began shaking his head, spraying droplets of water everywhere. That only meant he would have to change before getting the kinkster to study. "I have a boyfriend now, and I don't think Jonathan will want to hang out with me, the friend beater."

"Jonathan wouldn't believe Xpress over you," Rusty pointed out.

"That's true. But I'd rather lay low for a while. They've kept on dragging up all of my hookups since freshman year, and I think Jonathan is a bit weirded out about it. I mean, not one third of what they say in there is true, but still. No smoke without a fire, right?"

"It's not like you can change that," Rusty pointed out. "Jonathan's too smart to fall for it."

"I hope so," Maddox replied. "Have you thought about coming home with me for Thanksgiving?"

"I did," Rusty said. "But I do have plans with my dad. For real this time."

Maddox didn't comment on it. Rusty's strained relationship with his parents was a sore point. "Well, there's still plenty of studying to do until then, so how about we do that?" he suggested.

“Just because you’re asking,” Rusty said. “Otherwise, I wouldn’t study for the world.”

“I bet Kane could convince you if he put his mind to it. Dex might just beat you up, though.”

“Yeah, you’re the least worse,” Rusty said. “That’s why you’re my first bestie, and they are second besties.”

“I bet they’re just as pleased with that arrangement as you are. I’ll leave you to it, but I’ll wait for you in your room. You won’t get to go to sleep tonight without studying for at least two hours.”

“Does Jonathan like you with dark circles under your eyes?” Rusty smirked as he hiked himself up on his feet and began to wash.

Maddox stole a furtive look at Rusty’s junk. Jonathan’s was slightly longer. His own was thicker. “If that means that you plan on keeping me up late, you don’t scare me. I’ve had worse rides with you.”

“Good. Now let me wash my balls since you were so keen about not doing them for me. Unless you’ve changed your mind,” Rusty added with a smirk.

Maddox shook his head, a bit flustered over being caught staring. “No fucking way,” he said and walked out of the bathroom as quickly as he could.

What the hell was that all about now? Had he developed a sudden urge to check out other dudes’ junk? Maddox pursed his lips and frowned. It had to be Jonathan’s fault somehow; maybe it was because they had gone to that show and stared at that actor’s pride and glory on stage.

Whatever the hell it was, it had to stop. He belonged to one guy, and one guy only.

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One downside to being Maddox’s official boyfriend was that, everywhere he went now, random people wanted to talk to him. The polite thing to do was to exchange a few words and then be on his way. At first, he hadn’t been particularly annoyed by the attention since he had been such a loner all his life. However, having to stop and talk to anyone who thought him some kind of celebrity by association was starting to wear him down a little.

He put on the usual smile he had prepared for such situations when someone called him from one of the tables in the dining hall. Ready to offer a few perfunctory phrases, he turned, but when he saw Connor at the table, surrounded by his usual posse, his level of annoyance slightly intensified. Jonathan couldn’t say that he had anything against the guy, but they didn’t have anything in common either, except attending Statistics together. Nonetheless, he was supposedly an acquaintance and that warranted more than just the usual exchange of several phrases tops.

“Jonathan, how are you doing, my man?” Connor asked as soon as he greeted him back.

“You know, studying, mostly,” Jonathan offered. “How are things with you?”

“You would know if you asked him more often,” a female voice quipped from Connor’s right.

Jonathan craned his neck to identify the speaker, but Connor angled his body in such a way that he blocked him from seeing that person.

“Don’t mind my friends,” Connor said and smiled broadly, showing quite a bit of teeth. “You know, Jonathan, we were just having a very interesting conversation, and we hoped you could help us.”

“I doubt I’m more qualified than you are in regard to eco-friendly industries,” Jonathan offered politely, eager to extract himself from what portended to be a very tedious conversation.

“No, it’s not about that,” Connor said. “My friends here have a hard time wrapping their heads around certain aspects of human sexuality. So, I wouldn’t mind a little help from you since it looks like I’m failing to convince them.”

Jonathan didn’t hide his surprise. Instinctively, he grabbed the strap of his bag tightly. “I doubt I’m any kind of expert in that area, as well.”

“It concerns a very timely topic,” Connor continued, ignoring his very obvious discomfort. “You and Maddox are boyfriends now, correct?” He waited as if there was an actual need for confirmation on Jonathan’s part.

“Yes,” he said when he understood that he was expected to agree to that loud and clear.

“Maddox was well-known as not only a straight male,” Connor said in a grating scholarly voice, “but an unapologetic serial monogamist.”

“Serial monogamist?” Jonathan asked slowly.

“Apparently, any rumors concerning his being involved in sexual encounters with more than one partner are just that, rumors,” Connor offered promptly.

“All right,” Jonathan said, for lack of anything else to say. “What is the question?”

“Did Maddox just wake up one morning gay?” Another guy asked. “Connor was wondering,” he added quickly and withdrew his hands from the table, as if he had just committed the sin of talking too much.

Jonathan examined the speaker. He was a thin young man with eyes that looked unnaturally large behind his thick glasses. Something about him made Jonathan think of Uriah Heep from Dickens’s novel. “I don’t believe so,” he said slowly. He was of a mind to become flippant and tell them all to fuck off for a change, but that wasn’t him. “First of all, it would be better if you

asked Maddox about that, and second of all, you ought not to because it would be a rude question.”

A short, collective gasp moved through the people at the table like a wave.

“Why would it be rude? It’s normal to wonder why a straight man, successful with the ladies, suddenly switches to a relationship with another man.”

Jonathan frowned. Connor continued to act as a shield between him and the mysterious female speaker, and he couldn’t try to look around him without appearing suspicious. “Normal for whom?” he asked, punctuating every word.

“Anyone curious about the whole thing.”

It was so strange to look at Connor, while someone else was speaking from behind him. “Being curious about business that isn’t yours could be considered a flaw of character,” he said in a pedantic tone.

“Oh, bull,” the annoying female voice commented. “Everyone just wants to know how you turned Maddox Kingsley gay. And, of course, if you’re going to flip other guys, as well.”

Jonathan regretted stopping to talk to this bunch more and more by the second. “I did not flip anyone, to begin with. I suppose that when you like someone, other aspects simply don’t matter.”

“There’s no accounting for taste,” Uriah Heep chimed in.

When Jonathan stared him down, the boy looked away, cowering into the narrow space occupied by his own person as if he was trying to hide from the world. It only then occurred to Jonathan how little attention he had paid to Connor’s posse until now. At first, he had thought them to be just part of the usual campus crowd, maybe a little more eccentric in their choice of clothes and hair dye. Upon closer inspection, however, they looked like a strange collection of curiosities. Jonathan believed that he wouldn’t stoop so low as to judge anyone, but it seemed as if Connor had chosen the people of his personal fan club based on possible disadvantages that would motivate them to look up to him as someone superior. By Uriah Heep’s side, a girl who seemed to have painstakingly dyed each one-inch thick lock of her hair in a different color looked down and constantly touched her nose. Jonathan looked, his eyes drawn by her nervous gesture. There was nothing particularly wrong with her nose, as far as he could see, but she gave him a hard glare. “What? Something on my face?”

He shook his head. “No. Do you happen to have allergies? I could recommend--”

“Mind your own business.” Just like the boy on her right, she retreated into herself and masked her face with a handful of her multi-colored hair.

A couple, boy and girl, looked dejectedly at their plates on which some sorry salad lay bare. They were overweight, Jonathan noticed, but he couldn't understand why they had to be miserable about it. The others around them had burgers and fries, and that didn't bode well for their efforts to diet.

"Forgive them, please, Jonathan," Connor called in falsetto. "You know what they say. The more you don't know something, the more curious you become."

"I haven't heard that saying before," Jonathan pointed out.

"Someone wise and ancient said it," Connor said promptly.

Jonathan frowned. "Who?"

Connor shrugged like it was of no consequence. "It doesn't matter. But here's a piece of advice, Jonathan, because people will continue to pester you." He leaned slightly forward as if he was sharing something meant for Jonathan's ears only. "You need to have a better explanation at hand when you're asked again, so you can help people's assumptions to die down."

"What assumptions are those, exactly?"

Connor smiled, his eyes glinting with malice. "That Maddox cannot be the first and only guy you ever flipped. But cheer up, buddy, and take heart. It's like having a superpower. Are you finished yet?" He addressed the last question to the rest of the people at the table. The chubby couple tried to grab another quick bite from their salads, but everyone else was already getting up, ready to leave at the word of their leader.

Jonathan waited, while Connor got up and offered his hand to the girl by his side, the one who had spoken earlier. She quickly dragged her hoodie up, shielding her face, so he didn't catch even a glimpse of her features. Connor hooked one arm over her shoulders and began walking. He gave Jonathan one last arrogant look as he moved past.

In unison, except for the girl in the hoodie, everyone turned and gave him the same look. Jonathan stared back until they moved away. What a strange bunch, he thought to himself.

But what was the ominous sensation in the pit of his stomach that the conversation had left him with?

### *Chapter Thirty-One – Green-eyed Monster*

He didn't expect the unpleasant feeling in his gut to go away as the days passed by, bringing him closer to the day when he was supposed to call his parents and announce that he would pay them a visit on Thanksgiving. That was no shock, really. The most appropriate course of action was to do it and be done with it. Still, something was keeping him from taking that step, and he kept postponing the call even after he purchased his plane ticket.

How would they receive his reaching out? After so much silence, Jonathan felt as if they had become so estranged that it was as if they lived on different continents and hadn't seen each other in years if not more. Was this all that it took to forget about the importance of family? He liked to think he was better than to dismiss such essential emotional attachments from his heart. And yet, here he was, feeling more at home at Sunny Hill, in a tiny dorm room – tiny by the standards of his family's estate, of course – surrounded by strangers. Of course, that last bit wasn't entirely true.

He had friends, good friends, but they were all leaving to see their families, and that made him feel somewhat left out. Ray had extended an invitation to join him, and Jonathan didn't doubt that his BFF's parents had to be just as good-natured and easygoing as their son, but still, he couldn't help feeling that he would intrude on a space that belonged to family alone.

"What are you thinking about?" Maddox pressed a finger to Jonathan's forehead.

Supposedly, they were cooped up in Maddox's room to study, even if they didn't share the same classes except for Statistics. It looked like only one of them was keen on respecting the shared study time. Jonathan shook his head.

"I'm going to see my parents," he said in one dropped beat.

Maddox gave him a long, pensive look. "You don't sound very thrilled."

"I'm not," Jonathan confirmed. "I haven't talked to them in quite a while."

"They haven't called? Not once?" Maddox asked.

He rolled on his belly and looked upward at Jonathan. Wasn't he the luckiest guy alive? The sight of those pretty gray eyes, peering at him from underneath the rebellious dark locks, was making him easily forget about the unpleasant rock nestled in the pit of his stomach. "No. That doesn't mean that I should leave things as they are, though."

"Sure," Maddox agreed. "Jonathan, if you don't feel like visiting them, how about coming with me?"

"To your house?" Jonathan mumbled.

“That’s where I’m going,” Maddox said with a grin and a teasing wink. “And before you have one of those weird as fuck aristocratic strokes about protocol, manners, and who knows what else, no, you wouldn’t impose. And you’d get to visit my room. I could show you my Pokémon card collection,” he added and wiggled his eyebrows as if that kind of temptation should have been enough to tip Jonathan’s internal balance.

Jonathan laughed and ran one hand through Maddox’s hair to push it away from his handsome face. “Ugh, that’s a tough sell, right there. How could I say ‘no’ to something like that?”

Maddox’s face lit up. He even pushed himself up and sat on the bed with his legs crossed under him. “Don’t say ‘no’, then. Say ‘yes’.”

Jonathan sighed. “Trust me, I would. In a heartbeat.” Maddox’s face fell, so he hurried to add, “I just need to see them. Also, we might not want to drop a bombshell of such proportions on your folks.”

“What bombshell?” Maddox asked and looked at him with an expression of adorable confusion.

It was Jonathan’s turn to be a bit puzzled. “Have you told them already? About us?”

“Ah, that,” Maddox replied in an unconcerned tone. “Not yet. But I think it would be a good occasion to tell them on Thanksgiving.”

His boyfriend was completely nonchalant about the whole thing, so much so that Jonathan stared at Maddox for a bit.

“What?” Maddox asked him.

“Just like that?” Jonathan asked. “Don’t you think that they might be a little bit shocked about the situation? Or you plan on introducing me as just a friend?”

Maddox pulled at his right ear, only now seeming to consider the implications. “No, I would just tell them you’re my boyfriend.”

“Well, I don’t know your parents, but don’t you think that a bit of a heads-up would be nice? After all, they probably know you’re a notorious ladies’ man.”

Maddox smirked. “Now that’s something, and you’re right. From ladies’ man to one man’s man. Hmm, it sounded a little bit better in my head. Now, that you put it like that, I’ll call them first and tell them.”

“Wait,” Jonathan said, not really knowing why he was trying to stop Maddox from putting his plan into action. “I mean, maybe that’s the kind of thing you should tell them face to face.”

“My parents don’t care so much about formalities, but all right, I’ll do it the way you want. But only if you’re bent on going to visit your folks and absolutely don’t want to come with me. Otherwise, just say the word, and I’ll make that phone call.”

Jonathan leaned in and kissed Maddox on the forehead. “I have to go see them, as difficult as it might be for me and them equally.”

Maddox opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something but then appeared to think better of it. “Are you finished studying yet?”

Jonathan nodded. His mind wasn’t completely on the task at hand, and sometimes, as he well knew, he had to focus on what bothered him. As deep in thought as he was, he missed how Maddox snuck closer. Taken completely by surprise, he fell on his back with a short yelp.

“Hey,” Maddox drawled and stared at him with obvious naughtiness in his eyes.

“Hey,” Jonathan replied in kind, his heart beating a little faster.

“Is there any rule I’m breaking if I suggest a little bit of fun?”

“One or two,” Jonathan teased.

“Good,” Maddox said with determination and closed the gap between them for a short intense kiss. “Because I love being a rule breaker.”

Jonathan couldn’t protest that and adjusted his position to allow Maddox to settle between his legs with ease. They connected at the groin level, and the soft groans that left their lips at the same time triggered snickers from both. Maddox bit his bottom lip and hooked his crotch into Jonathan’s. “Someone misses you very much.”

“Who might that be?” Jonathan asked and grabbed Maddox by his sexy ass to pull him closer and make their hips move in synch.

“A good friend of yours,” Maddox breathed out and snuck his tongue between Jonathan’s lips, giving him a taste of the deliciousness that was all him.

“I have a few good friends,” Jonathan teased a little bit more and then flipped Maddox off him to capture him underneath. “But I think you refer to the little guy that enjoys my mouth to tip resuscitation technique the most.”

“Did you just make a joke?” Maddox snickered. “So lame. And little guy? Really?”

“Hey, I’m trying,” Jonathan replied, determined to make that smirk on Maddox’s face turn into something else. “And he’s not that little, I admit,” he added.

He only had to touch the hard thing stretching Maddox's jeans to the limit when he achieved his goal. Maddox's curly eyelashes dropped, and his lips parted, letting out a sighing whisper. Jonathan decided that he wouldn't be the kind to tease his boyfriend endlessly and moved lower until he could comfortably fish Maddox's cock from his jeans and give the tip a long passionate kiss.

The thing twitched in his hand, and Jonathan took that as a good sign right away. He stuck out his tongue as far as he could and licked around the mushroom, letting his eyes flicker up to Maddox from time to time. Maddox had placed his hands behind his head and was taking in the view, his eyes at half-mast, with an expression of unhidden bliss on his face.

Jonathan continued to up the ante. He used all his skill to make the mushroom head grow and fill his mouth with it in one go. Maddox's gentle encouragements to go faster and deeper didn't deter him from his plan. After all, there was a part of him that pushed him to tease his boyfriend a little bit more before giving in completely.

"Swallow my cock," Maddox let out with a moan. "Oh, fuck, you look so beautiful like this." He placed one hand on Jonathan's head, pushing him to take more, but then realized what he was doing and moved his hand away.

Jonathan protested with his mouth full and grabbed Maddox's wrist to bring his hand back. Maddox appeared happy at the prospect of being allowed to do as he wanted and his hand firmed on the crown of Jonathan's head.

In all honesty, Jonathan enjoyed both sides of Maddox. He liked the pliant, slightly submissive one, but he simply adored to be used, too, because he wasn't afraid Maddox would take advantage of his surrender. He settled into a rhythm while Maddox gave him cues with how he pressed his head down from time to time.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Maddox chanted his release while he filled Jonathan's mouth with fresh tasty cum.

Jonathan withdrew only a little so that it didn't all go down his throat. It was one of his kinks to show his mouth full to his lover. He did so as he pulled back completely and stuck out his tongue slightly, wiggling it a bit. Maddox groaned and threw one arm over his face. "What do you want me to do now?" he moaned. "I just came."

Jonathan swallowed quickly and laughed. "I think I just love to tease you." He closed the distance to Maddox and lay by his side.

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There couldn't be one contender in the whole frigging world. Jonathan knew how to suck cock for real. Maddox knew that he was supposed to have a lot of basis for comparison, but frankly

speaking, he couldn't recall any other blowjobs, not as he was coming down from his high. And Jonathan was such a freaking tease, showing him his mouth full of cum and his enjoyment at swallowing like an expert. On top of it all, no one else could say they knew what it felt like to have those perfectly arched lips wrapped around their cocks.

Well, no one but one guy. Maddox knew, deep down, that he had to be a bit nutso to be jealous of that dude, but he couldn't help thinking that Jonathan had been like this with Drew before. It made him want to learn more about the asshole, he wanted to know what he looked like. What he would do with that information, he had no idea. But it was annoying to know that somewhere, out in the world, there was a rival to what he had.

Jonathan didn't have to know about that fucked up shit in his head. He would probably hurry to assure him that Drew was nothing but old history, and that he only liked Maddox. Well, that was another problem. Stupid or not, Maddox wanted to hear Jonathan say it first. That was a secret he hadn't shared with anyone. Dex would probably call him an idiot to his face, Kane would try to work some psychoanalysis on his ass, and Rusty would offer to convince Jonathan to confess his love to Maddox through who knew what fearsome means.

Therefore, it was on him to make sense of it all and to convince himself not to be an asshole. It was a good thing that Jonathan had brought their families into the conversation. And as caught up as he had been in wooing Jonathan – if wooing was called whatever he had done – and making him his that he hadn't thought of talking to his folks about how he had gotten himself a gorgeous boyfriend.

Maddox knew they would be all right with the whole thing. They were gentle people, open-minded, and surely not the kind to shun their son for liking a boy. But he could bet that Jonathan's parents were the complete opposite of that, and of course, the guy had his hang-ups and they were completely understandable.

Nonetheless, it was only considerate and polite – two things Jonathan was very good at – if he told his parents about it all before introducing his boyfriend to the family. His mom would love Jonathan; he was sure of it. She had a soft spot for handsome, well-mannered men. The fact that she married his dad was proof enough of that. Between the two of them, she was the one more down to earth, and that had imprinted on how she had brought them up all. Even his sisters were completely no-nonsense and direct, something that might not have endeared them to many men, but proved, as their mom said, very useful in setting apart the worthy ones from the good-for-nothing ones.

His dad would probably want to know a lot of things about Jonathan. He was overscrupulous when it came to who his sons and daughters married or chose as their girlfriends and boyfriends, and that meant that Maddox would be no exception. So far, he had had it easy, but that was only because both his mom and dad were convinced that he was only going through a phase when he just liked girls too much to settle for one.

What would they think and say once they learned he finally got in a serious relationship? Jonathan was right, in a way. It was a bit of a bombshell, and it was a sign of maturity not to treat things lightly when telling them about Jonathan.

Jonathan put his head on Maddox's chest and his breathing soon became even. Only then did Maddox realize he had been so caught up in thinking about what Jonathan had said about talking to his parents that he had forgotten that he wanted to reciprocate. "Jonathan?" he called out hesitantly.

He had noticed lately that his boyfriend was a bit troubled, and he assumed that it was because of his strained relationship with his folks. From all of the experience he had with Rusty on that topic, he was patiently waiting for Jonathan to open up to him.

"Hmm?" Jonathan's sleepy voice replied.

Maddox caressed his hair. "Do you think you could come while sleeping if I blow you?"

Jonathan's head snapped up quickly. He no longer seemed very sleepy. "I don't know. Is it a theory you want to explore?"

"Not if you're not sleepy anymore."

"I could try to go back to sleep, and you could put your theory to the test."

Jonathan enjoyed teasing him a lot. Maddox loved being teased. What else could be said except that they were a match made in heaven? "Let me blow you anyway," he offered.

As he said that, he felt his mouth water. Oh yes, who would have thought he'd like to suck cock so much? And Jonathan's was like a delicious lollipop, good to lick from all sides. Also, those hairless balls were to die for. Maddox could tell that Jonathan enjoyed it that he didn't shave or wax by how the guy practically worshipped his entire body, but he had to admit that he enjoyed Jonathan's smooth skin.

With those thoughts in mind, he pushed Jonathan onto his back, deciding that it was his turn. He freed Jonathan from his dress pants – always the well-dressed one – and took a moment to admire the tent his guy was sporting. That bulge was mouth-watering indeed. Maddox opened his mouth wide and trapped it between his lips, wetting the fabric of his underwear.

"I so want to eat this thing," he declared.

"Then please go ahead," Jonathan urged him. "I mean, I would very much like for you to--" His words died on his lips as Maddox pulled down his underwear and took hold of his cock in one fell swoop.

Damn, indeed, that kind of thing was tastier than Maddox would have ever imagined. He wondered briefly if different cocks had different flavors. Cum tended to not always be the same, and he had tasted his from Jonathan's mouth on many occasions. He could vouch that it was slightly different from Jonathan's cum which was smoother than his own which tended to be creamier and denser.

Unlike him, Jonathan seemed to lose his usual polite ways when it came to sex. He grabbed a handful of Maddox's hair and guided him to take him in his mouth to the rhythm he wanted. It was a bit like being used, and Maddox couldn't say that he disliked it. If anything, he liked it a lot when Jonathan took the reins. He was a smooth leader, but a firm one, and that kind of gentle power made Maddox want to give in any time he was asked.

So he allowed Jonathan to fuck his mouth as his hips bucked off the bed and pushed upward. Maddox couldn't tell what he liked more, to be sucked off by Jonathan's skilled mouth, or to be the one used for pleasure like right now. Everything was new and a thrill ride. Jonathan took very little time to reach his peak, and Maddox swallowed everything as he was made to take it.

They lay on their backs, breathing hard, their hands entangled. "You're a bit of a dom," Maddox said and snickered.

"Me? A dom?" Jonathan asked, surprised by his words. "I doubt it."

"Nah, you definitely are," Maddox insisted. "The way you hold my head to fuck my mouth, that's a telling sign."

"Am I too forceful? I'm sorry--"

"Shut up. I like it," Maddox drawled the words teasingly. "You know how to take guys in hand, don't you?" He hadn't meant to let it come out like that, as if there was someone else, there in the room with them.

"Guys? No," Jonathan protested quickly. "Just you, it seems."

"You never did it with Drew, right?" Clearly, he couldn't keep his tongue in check today.

"He never sucked me off, Maddox," Jonathan said pointedly.

"I know that. It's just that, I mean, were you ever like this with him?"

Jonathan pushed himself up on one elbow and looked at him. Maddox kept staring at the ceiling. "Where is all this coming from? I've already told you everything about Drew."

Maybe he had, and maybe he hadn't. Maddox twiddled his thumbs as he held his hands linked over his belly.

Jonathan let out an annoyed grunt. "Fine. Ask me," he said.

Maddox peered at him with just one eye, closing the other. “Okay. What was it like to be with him?”

*Were you in love with him?* Jonathan had said something to that extent, and Maddox was now pleased to discover the source of his strange jealousy.

Jonathan averted his eyes. The gloomy expression on his face made Maddox feel guilty, but he felt like this was the kind of thing that needed to be brought out in the open and not allowed to fester and stir up unpleasant stuff later.

“He used me as he saw fit,” Jonathan said in a strained voice.

“That’s not what I’m asking,” Maddox insisted.

The hurt in the amber eyes as they rested on him made him recoil a little. But he had opened that door and didn’t intend to close it until he got his answers.

“It was exciting.” Jonathan sighed and his gaze dropped. He began tracing invisible circles on the duvet. “He made me feel things I’ve never felt before.”

“Did you think he was beautiful?”

Jonathan let out a short cruel snort. “Of course, I did.”

Maddox felt a pang of internal pain at that blunt admission. Maybe he deserved it.

“I thought I had a real friend in him,” Jonathan continued. “Perhaps that’s why I felt so betrayed. He knew things about me, things no one else knew.”

“What things?”

Jonathan looked at him again. He seemed upset. “You know more, if that’s any comfort.”

“Name one.”

Jonathan pushed himself off the bed, straightening his clothes in the process. “You know I can tell a joke,” he said in a light, yet somewhat forced tone, and Maddox couldn’t help thinking that it was an attempt to throw him off the trail.

He kept on it. Just like Jonathan, he moved, zippered up his jeans, but remained seated on the bed. He followed Jonathan with his eyes while the other paced the room. “He knew you for longer than me, right? When you left?”

Jonathan ran one hand through his hair. “He did. But he didn’t. He didn’t care to know who I was, just that I was a fucking warm mouth when he needed one.” The last words were spoken in a harsh tone.

Maddox climbed off the bed and caught Jonathan's arm, stopping his pacing. He pulled him into a hug. "You're something else to me," he said and moved one hand over Jonathan's back in circles, feeling the tense muscles underneath.

"Thank God for that," Jonathan replied. "I mean, thank you, Maddox. And trust me, you don't have one reason to be jealous of him. Besides the fact that he's a part of my past, I don't care for him at all. I don't even think about him anymore."

That was a lie, but Maddox was going to let it slide. His boyfriend's soul was chipped in places, but Maddox wouldn't change him for the world. What he should do right now was to stop poking at those chinks in Jonathan's armor. He had no business opening up what should have been old wounds by now.

Kane would be so proud of him if he knew how mature he was acting about the whole thing. He'd definitely say that he'd grown and stuff.

"Then I don't want to hear about him anymore, either," he promised.

Jonathan relaxed in his embrace. He hugged back and kissed Maddox's cheek. "Maybe we should call it a night? We've studied. Some."

Maddox snickered. "Yeah, we did. And," he said, while sneaking a hand under Jonathan's shirt and pleasing himself with the touch of bare skin, "we got rid of the hard stuff, too."

"Hard stuff." Jonathan giggled in his ear. "I love your hard stuff very much. Anytime you need a fix --"

Maddox shut him up with a kiss. With him, he vowed, Jonathan would never feel used. "I can barely wait to show you off to my folks. How about a selfie?" He went and grabbed his phone. Jonathan didn't protest when Maddox pulled him close and snapped a picture. He looked at it. "Hey, look at the camera, not me," he said and raised his arm for another pic.

Not that he didn't like the way Jonathan looked at him. But that was a pic he was going to keep only for himself. For the rest of the world, Jonathan could show off his pretty eyes a little.

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Maddox was jealous. Jonathan turned the idea over in his head, not knowing what to do with it. It should have made him somewhat happy, right? It meant that Maddox liked him a lot. But the simple fact that he seemed incapable of assuaging these feelings in his boyfriend didn't sit well with him.

It was the shame, he realized, the shame that he couldn't let go of. He was supposed to tell Maddox everything, to get it all out in the open, in the minutest detail, how Drew had betrayed him. Yet, he still was hung up on the sordid details, afraid that--

What was he afraid of? He took one deep breath, forcing himself to remain in the moment, to take in the trees that lined the path to the dorm, the slightly crooked bench at his right, how pleasantly the chilly air pinched his cheeks.

No wonder Maddox felt jealous and confused. Jonathan had a hard time coming to terms with Drew's betrayal, and it still hurt, like a cut that had sliced his underbelly, and he didn't believe himself capable of getting rid of it.

He'd have to think about it. He'd have to find a way to make sure that Maddox didn't have to suffer from jealousy or anything else even remotely. One way to do that would be to tell him that he hated Drew, but that wouldn't be the truth. In reality, Jonathan pitied him, and that kind of thing would be tough to explain to Maddox who seemed so no-nonsense and far removed from any muddied feelings.

One thing at a time. He stopped and took another deep breath. First, he needed to face his parents. Then, he would make it so that he was a worthy boyfriend to Maddox, not someone who got scared and hid inside himself at the slightest provocation.

## *Chapter Thirty-Two – Sh\*tty Families*

It was now or never, Jonathan declaimed the words in his own head, as he squeezed the phone in his hand. The people around him moved fast, out of synch with his hesitant steps. He made a left turn and sat down on a bench, his fingers gripping the phone too tightly. With one last deep breath before the dive, he lightly touched the screen, hoping for a technological glitch at the last moment.

“Hello?” His first word was a pebble thrown into a bottomless pit.

“Jonathan.” Matter-of-factly, directly, like they had just seen each other a week or so before.

Neither of them uttered another word, waiting for the other to say something.

“What have you been doing?” There was a slight upward inflection at the end, a reproach of sorts, not at all just a formal and polite question as it could have been interpreted.

“I’ve been studying,” he offered the only neutral thing that came to mind. Nothing along the lines of ‘I’ve been making friends’ or ‘I got myself a boyfriend’. For this occasion, it was better to bury the hatchet and leave it undisturbed for the next few days.

“I spoke with the dean. Whenever you decide to pick up from where you left off, you are welcome to return.”

Jonathan moved the phone from one ear to the other. “I will finish my studies here.”

A short silence followed. “Sunny Hill, is it?”

So, they knew. Jonathan didn’t bother to ask how. Without a doubt, they were people with means and they never hesitated using them when the need arose.

“Yes, Sunny Hill.”

“You are determined to finish your studies there.”

“Yes.”

“Very well.”

Jonathan didn’t know what else to add. Could it be that his father truly agreed with his decision?

“If you want to make a mess out of your future.”

Of course, how could he not see it coming? The other shoe, always waiting to drop. He took a deep breath. “I was thinking of coming home for Thanksgiving.” He waited, while his father remained silent.

“You are welcome here, any time you decide to come back.”

Was that a veiled condition for him to be allowed to visit them? To go back home and play the nice quiet son once again?

“We can also discuss the Kincaid family when you visit.”

Jonathan felt his eyebrows knitting into a tight frown. “What about them?” he managed to force the words through his teeth by sheer power of will or a miracle.

“I spoke with them. They agree that the whole thing was blown out of proportion.”

“By the whole thing, do you mean my getting as good as executed by the great powers that be on false grounds?” Jonathan didn’t realize he was raising his voice until a woman with a kid passing by gave him a strange look.

He half-turned from the street, the phone pressed tightly against his ear.

“The dean agrees, too. I already told you. You are welcome back, whenever you decide. Of course, it doesn’t mean that you should take advantage of people’s benevolence.”

A hand of iron gripped Jonathan’s throat, threatening his ability to breathe. “I will not go back to that school,” he said as firmly as he could without letting his father hear the trembling in his voice.

“We will talk more when you arrive.”

Jonathan looked around, resting his eyes on a colorful light ornament glittering behind the clear windows of a store. “What do you want to talk about? Regarding... Andrew Kincaid?”

“His parents took measures to correct his behavior. I can assure you of that. They told me to give them a call if I heard from you. Your fellow student will extend his apologies as soon as he’s given the opportunity.”

“Apologies?” Jonathan squeezed his eyes shut and pinched the bridge of his nose in an effort to chase away the pain nesting behind his forehead. “What kind of apology would ever be enough for what he did?”

“You are very young, Jonathan. Andrew, as well. You both made mistakes, and you’re not the first, or the last, to fall prey to certain temptations.”

Was his father talking about the sexual nature of his and Drew’s relationship? Or about the drugs Drew used to do on the regular?

“Of course, we would like you to take a test as soon as you arrive. These schools,” his father said with vague contempt, “are known as dens of iniquity.”

“Do you think I’m doing drugs?” Jonathan didn’t know what to think. “I didn’t do drugs when Drew got caught.”

“It’s a measure to put your mother’s mind, and mine, at ease.”

“You still don’t believe me,” Jonathan said in a bitter voice. “You think I lied to you.”

“You have become rather obstinate. What is happening with you? If this is about the situation with Andrew--”

“It has nothing to do with him. Not anymore,” Jonathan said in a strained voice. “It is about us. You and I, as a family. You should have known me, dad.”

Short pauses were for effect, but not with his father. He always thought before speaking, choosing from the various possible answers as from a box of cutlery. It had to be flawless and in synch with the rest of the table arrangement. “You surprised us. Quite unpleasantly. Before you hurry to condemn us, if Andrew is what you wish for in a partner,” the last word came out with some difficulty, “it is something we could come to accept.”

Jonathan shook his head, although he knew very well that his parent couldn’t see him. “Should I be thankful for that?”

“Certainly, at least not as ungrateful as you sound right now. Come home. We have many things to discuss.”

Jonathan rubbed his temple hard. “I think it’s too early for us to see each other again.”

“What nonsense. You just said that you plan on visiting us.”

“No.” Jonathan surprised even himself with the categorical answer. “You’re sweeping everything under the rug. You believe Andrew and I should kiss and make up, as if we just had some schoolyard brawl. And that all will go back to the way it was. Well, maybe not as it was. Apparently, you’re willing to consider that you can accept my being gay.”

“It isn’t like you to speak out of turn in such a fashion. What are they teaching you at that school? The next thing we know, you might pick habits such as protesting for the wellbeing of whales or against nuclear testing, or something just as silly.”

Jonathan felt hot and cold at the same time. It was true that he had never before dared to talk like this to his father.

“We appreciate your ability to be self-reliant,” his father continued. “But you are a Hamilton. Doesn’t that name mean anything to you?”

Oh, there came the guilt trip. Jonathan decided that he would have none of it. “Happy Thanksgiving, dad. Tell mom I wish her well.”

“Jonathan,” his father said sternly. “Stop this nonsense. Fine, if you do not wish to talk to Andrew and accept his apologies, we can wait until you’re less hotheaded than right now. But come home.”

If he had been the kind to believe in miracles, Jonathan would have thought that there was a trace of something human and father-like in how the last sentence was spoken. But no. He would just fall back into his old patterns, and it would mean that he hadn’t learned anything from his past experiences.

“If Andrew,” Jonathan said through his teeth, “had wanted so much to apologize to me, he could have called any time. I doubt his intentions are sincere. But, after all, when were they ever?”

“Forget about the Kincaids for now,” his father cut his words short. “Come home.”

The last thing Jonathan expected was for his parent to admit that they missed him, just as he missed them. And it didn’t come, of course.

“No, I cannot.”

“Will you never come home?” his father asked harshly. “What do you hope to prove with this?”

“No, I am not saying that. I will come and see you. I just don’t know when. Maybe I should wait for my hotheadedness to cool first.”

“Sarcasm doesn’t become you.”

“That is something I can live with. Goodbye, dad. I hope you won’t tell Andrew you heard from me. God forbid he feel any pressure to call. I’m on a diet of no bullshit lately.”

His father sucked in a breath. “I can see what kind of school you’re attending. Let them strip you of your good upbringing if that makes you happy.”

For a moment, Jonathan considered apologizing for the rude language but stopped himself. He had to accept so much from them, their distrust, their betrayal, after all. They could live with hearing words that hadn’t belonged in any Hamilton’s vocabulary to date. Even that was hypocritical of them. Jonathan had heard his grandfather swearing like a sailor on at least two separate occasions. The façade was cracked; he wouldn’t think for a moment about closing his eyes to the fissures in the edifice his father considered their family to be.

“Goodbye, son. I hope to hear from you once you put that head of yours in order.”

Jonathan waited for his father to terminate the conversation without saying another word. He could measure the time in heartbeats. It only took three for his dad to hang up on him.

He caught his head in both hands, pulling at tufts of hair until the slight pain stabilized him. Well, that left him little choice. Thanksgiving on his own would have to do.

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“I’m sorry, but we cannot refund you for the ticket.”

Jonathan nodded. There wasn’t much he could do about that, of course, and it had been a crap shoot to begin with. He should have tried online, but his steps had taken him to the airport anyway. It was as if there was still an unraveled thread pulling him toward his previously planned destination.

“Maybe if someone needed one?” the woman offered with an apologetic smile. Her colleague on her right gestured for her to lean in. Her face lit up immediately. “It looks like there’s a passenger who might want your ticket.”

Jonathan turned to witness a rambunctious group of kids followed by two adults.

“Do you happen to have an extra ticket?” The woman asked him, and her eyes were full of hope. “You see, we weren’t expecting my husband,” she gestured at the man who grabbed the kids, two boys of around ten, under his arms, “to come home, and we made other plans with the family--”

Jonathan handed her the ticket without saying a word.

“Oh, we should pay for it. We’re so, so grateful,” she said as she began rummaging through her purse.

“No need,” he said.

“Are you sure?” She stopped and took a good look at him. “No, it’s not possible. It’s quite expensive.”

“I insist,” he said and extended his arm more so that she would take the ticket. “Happy Thanksgiving.”

He turned on his heel while the couple was still thanking him profusely for his grand gesture. It took some of the bitter taste off his tongue, but not all of it.

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It was still possible to call Maddox or Ray, but he felt that he would just be imposing. People, normal people, were reuniting with their families now and didn’t need to hear about his miserable conversation with his father. He took a look inside the small fridge and nodded thoughtfully. With just a few ingredients, he could put together a festive dinner of sorts for tomorrow.

But, before that, he wanted to take a walk. The campus was almost deserted, with very few students hurrying with luggage out of their dorms, chatting happily and making plans for their short vacation.

It was such a strange feeling to see the place, usually so animated, being drained of the young blood that made it what it was. Without the joyous voices to break the silence, nothing remained but buildings, but Jonathan didn't mind it.

He waved at the security guard making his rounds. "When are you leaving, Jonathan?" he asked.

"Change of plans," he said brightly. "I'll have to spend Thanksgiving here."

"That's too bad. Did you miss your flight?"

The man had seen him earlier, with the plane ticket clutched in his hand, hurrying off like everyone else. "Yes. I don't know where my head is at these days."

"It must be because of too much studying." Not only the students, but the personnel on campus had gotten to know him. Jonathan had no desire to be a celebrity, but he was always polite and apparently that made him stand out from the student body in general in the eyes of the people who worked there. "Take it easy, and enjoy your Thanksgiving, anyway," the security guard wished him.

Jonathan offered the same in return and continued his walk against the fading tide. There were no more students now, and the silence was starting to creep in like a veil. He looked up and noticed something white and small descending and landing on the tip of his nose. He sneezed. It was snowing. As far as he was aware, it shouldn't be, but he had been too busy with other things lately to be concerned about the weather forecast.

His father sneered at Sunny Hill as if it were some inferior institution of education. Jonathan had come to love the campus and its buildings, and he smiled when he noticed the renovations under construction. He and Maddox had had some truly interesting moments behind those buildings. The snow fell gently, covering everything and making the silence all the more pleasant. Now, Jonathan could see the traces of his steps stretching behind him.

The windows everywhere were dark, but one was lit. Jonathan looked up. Could it be that there was someone still in there? Maybe they had just forgotten to turn off the light. It was the arts building, a place he didn't have any business to be in, given his major, but he doubted anyone would mind if he just walked over to the first floor and turned off the light.

There was a chance that the door was locked, and his good intentions wouldn't matter, but when he put his hand on the handle, it turned, granting him access right away. Jonathan shrugged. It wasn't as if anyone would walk in there and steal something, right? He walked up the stairs, deciding to remind the security guard that this building hadn't been locked yet.

Jonathan stopped on the landing as his ears caught something. It was a muffled sound and it came from one of the rooms, and when he walked closer, he realized that it came from the one with the light still on. He stopped in front of it and pressed his ear against it. Definitely, someone was in there.

And he was singing. A pleasant male tenor voice drifted to Jonathan's ears, convincing him that he shouldn't refuse himself the pleasure of opening the door to the music room and witnessing firsthand the young artist displaying his virtuosity.

He would be quiet so that he didn't interrupt. Jonathan turned the handle slowly, pushing the door open little by little, all the while his hearing focused on the fantastic voice that continued attacking the highest notes of the classical aria. Did their school have such an amazing talent? Why had he never heard about it? Who could it be? Jonathan couldn't say he knew all the students, but he hoped he wasn't as dull and uninterested in the life around him to be unaware of the presence of an incredible artist in such close proximity.

He stopped in the doorway and froze when he realized who was there. Headphones on, lost in a world of his own, sitting on a high chair in front of a microphone, was no one other than Rusty. Jonathan gaped and blinked. Was this some kind of lip-synching?

But no, it couldn't be, he thought, as his eyes, glued to Rusty's lips, could see the obvious effort he put into pronouncing each of the Italian words. There was a candid misstep here and there that convinced Jonathan he was witnessing the unfathomable.

Rusty was singing. No, he wasn't just singing. He was displaying true talent, force and passion. Jonathan took a step back, hoping that he still had the time to make himself scarce without looking like an intruder, which he was.

But the aria reached its final notes, and Jonathan hesitated, as the music lover in him ached to witness all of it. Rusty smiled and his eyes opened. Without anything left for him to do, Jonathan let go of the door and clapped. "Bravo!"

The mischievous green eyes grew wide. Rusty threw off the headphones and tripped over some wires as he hurried to reach Jonathan. "Hamilton, you're a dead man!" he shouted.

Ah, well. Now that was his cue to make a run for it. He made a one-eighty and rushed out and down the stairs, Rusty on his tail. It didn't help that he was laughing while trying to put some serious distance between him and his pursuer; for some reason, the fact that Rusty could sing and that he was now chasing him seemed incredibly funny.

The chase only underscored who the athlete was between them. Rusty caught him just as he tried to pull open the front door of the building. Jonathan felt himself hoisted by the shoulders of his coat and then thrown against the wall. "Ouch!" he protested while trying to catch his breath.

Rusty grabbed him by the lapels of his coat and stared him down. Light from the streetlamps filtered through the tall windows, so they could make out each other's faces, making it obvious what their eyes were saying right now.

"The fuck you doing here, Hamilton?" Rusty shook him.

"I should ask you the same. Stop shaking me already."

He didn't expect Rusty to obey, but the guy stopped abruptly and let go of his coat. Then, he put a finger in Jonathan's face. "You're going to keep your mouth shut, or we're going to have a problem."

"Really?" Jonathan adjusted his clothes and let out a snort. All that chasing had left him with no air in his lungs. Still, he felt like laughing. It was no less than exhilarating to be chased down a corridor like that. "What kind of problem?"

Rusty munched on his lower lip, as if he was thinking of ways to make Jonathan disappear. "I could ask nicely," he said abruptly and looked Jonathan straight in the eye.

No wonder people were crazy about this particular Sunny Hill student, both girls and guys, as far as Jonathan knew. Seconds ago, he had looked like he was about to commit a murder like an Italian opera buffo, and now he was playing nice.

Jonathan sighed. "Sorry about intruding on your personal time like that. You don't have to worry. I won't tell anyone that you can sing. Although, it's quite a shame. You have a wonderful voice."

Rusty rubbed the back of his neck. It didn't look like he wanted to elaborate on Jonathan's remarks in any way. "Weren't you supposed to go visit your folks or something?"

Jonathan shrugged. "I was." He didn't add anything, either. "So, when are you going to leave?"

"Leave where?"

"To visit your dad. Maddox told me. I hope it wasn't a secret," he said quickly and ready to apologize.

To his relief, Rusty grabbed him by the shoulder and squeezed hard. "Nah. I'm spending Thanksgiving here."

"What a coincidence," Jonathan said, somewhat relieved. "Same here."

Not that he would ask Rusty to make plans together, even if now they were, most probably, the only students left behind.

Rusty made a gesture for him to walk out of the building first. “Let me guess,” he said as soon as they were outside. “Shitty family?”

Jonathan stopped and looked at him. Rusty was underdressed, in just a t-shirt and sweatpants. “I suppose you could say that,” he said quietly.

Rusty nodded thoughtfully and stuffed his hands in his pants pockets. “Same here.”

There appeared to be a tacit understanding between them. “You can sing,” Jonathan said automatically. He didn’t know exactly how to behave around Rusty, now that they were walking side by side, across the deserted campus.

“Yeah,” Rusty admitted.

“But you suck at karaoke. I mean, Maddox told me as much, and I even witnessed... Hey, don’t you have a coat? If you left it back there--”

“Nope. Wait, don’t tell me you’re going to criticize my fashion sense now.”

Jonathan recognized a challenge when he heard one. Also, he understood that Rusty didn’t want to talk about the incredible fact that he had a voice that recommended him for the greatest opera stages in the world. Still, it didn’t mean that he would let it go, just like that. It irked him to no end, he realized, that Rusty was hiding it. Clearly, Maddox and the rest of Rusty’s closest friends didn’t have any idea about it, unless it was a secret better guarded than Fort Knox.

“Your fashion sense is impeccable,” he said in a deadpan voice.

“Really? Have you seen these?” Rusty gestured for him to examine his footwear.

Jonathan’s eyes grew wide. “Pardon my French, but are you out of your goddamn mind?”

Rusty snickered and raised one foot, displaying the pink plastic croc with what seemed like real pride.

Jonathan pursed his lips and grabbed the guy by his elbow. “It’s snowing.”

“It wasn’t when I left the house,” Rusty said defensively. “Hey, where are you taking me?”

“My dorm room is close by. I’m going to give you some socks.”

“Hmm, kinky.”

“Only you would say something stupid like that. I’m also going to give you a sweater. What do you have to say about that?”

“I’ll have to give it some thought. Trust me, I can come up with something,” Rusty promised.

“I don’t doubt it for a moment. Hey, how did you catch me so quickly wearing crocs?” Jonathan wondered out loud.

Rusty’s grin was worthy of a world record. “Not my fault your ass slow, Hamilton,” he drawled.

“Jesus, you’re a natural talent, aren’t you?” Jonathan murmured mostly to himself.

“What do you mean by that?” Rusty asked.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have said it like that. I know you must be working hard to be in such good shape. And you’re an athlete, after all.”

“Now you’re just buttering me up. You really want to put those socks on me that badly?”

Jonathan grunted as he pushed Rusty to walk into the dorm building first. “I don’t know how everyone puts up with you.”

“They must like me,” Rusty said.

“There is plenty to like, I admit. Let’s go up. And you’re going to tell me why the world thinks you cannot sing if your life depended on it, while you’re a Pavarotti in the making.”

“Who’s Pavarotti?”

“Shut up, Rusty. You’re not fooling me again. You know who Pavarotti is.”

“I do,” Rusty admitted. “You’re not letting me off the hook about this, are you?”

“Are you kidding me? It’s the juiciest bit of news since Maddox’s dog died.”

Rusty laughed. “Are you going to sell me out?”

“No. I’m not that kind of person. And I detest Xpress and everything it stands for. But I cannot let go of this tasty bone, you do realize that, right?”

“Bone? Are you a dog, Hamilton?”

“Oh, shut up, Rusty. I should have known you’d take any word of mine and make it sound perverted.”

“Hey, I’m going easy on you, you know? I could have said something about boners,” Rusty pointed out.

“Well, then I should consider myself lucky. Get in.” Jonathan opened the door to his and Ray’s place and held it for Rusty to walk inside.

Rusty stopped for a moment before going in. “Jonathan,” he said in a somewhat hesitant voice, “can I spend Thanksgiving with you?”

“Sure. But I have to warn you. It’s going to be a meager meal. I wasn’t prepared.”

Rusty shrugged and finally walked inside. “Good. ‘Cause I have a turkey and no idea what to do with it.”

“You have a turkey?”

“Yeah.” Rusty walked into the small kitchen. “Your place is so tiny!” he exclaimed. “We’ll party at mine.”

“All right,” Jonathan agreed. “But where did you get a turkey?”

“That’s my secret,” Rusty said promptly.

“One of many. And before you ask, no, I won’t let you be until you tell me all about your incredible voice.”

Rusty cocked his head and stared at him. “Is it that incredible?”

Jonathan nodded solemnly. “Yes. And no, I’m not buttering you up only so that I can convince you to let me put socks on you.”

Thanksgiving with Rusty. Now that was going to be an experience. Jonathan hoped he was ready for it.

### *Chapter Thirty-Three – Because I Love Him*

Maddox peeked at his phone, to see if Jonathan had happened to send him a message, and he missed it by accident. Not that they had talked about sending messages to and fro as soon as each went his way, but he missed him already. Probably Jonathan was caught up with his family by now. His plane must have landed about an hour or so ago. And that family reunion was bound to be strained, from the little he had managed to learn from Jonathan. It felt a bit disheartening to think they were still not sharing everything, but Maddox knew that he needed to be patient.

Still, he thought, while taking out his phone one last time before reaching the front door of his house, he missed him so much already.

He didn't even have to reach for the handle before the door opened wide in front of him, and his mom, an apron tied around her waist and her entire face shining, emerged through it. Maddox laughed and took her in his arms, making sure to pretend that she weighed a ton. She laughed, too, and slapped him with the kitchen towel she had in one hand. "And to think that I tell everyone you're my favorite. Put me down this instant, odious child!"

His dad was already at the door and Maddox hugged him, as well.

"So glad you made it. Mary is still not here, and she might not join us at all this year," his mom began to chatter. "Hope has an ear infection. She's at that age. I just hope they don't end up spending Thanksgiving at the hospital, and that it's not that serious. But Vern is here, full team included."

"You've grown a bit," his dad said and guided him into the large living room.

An assortment of curly-haired heads turned toward him in an instant, and soon Maddox was surrounded by his nephews and nieces. Of all his siblings, Vern was the one to follow most closely in their parents' footsteps. He had four kids. Mary only had Hope, and the others who were married had yet to consider having children. The look of pride on his mom's face when she took in her extended family reminded him of how many times she told them that her children had always been her biggest wealth.

Vern and his wife joined in, patiently pulling their offspring from Maddox before he managed to lose his balance. The youngest, Noah, was like a monkey, and had already managed to climb on his back and was now refusing to get down from Maddox's shoulders. His mom had to bribe him with a piece of candy.

"Glad to see you, guys," he told everyone as he hugged one relative after another. "Who else besides Mary is missing all the action?"

"Stenton is in the Bahamas, can you believe it?" Emma, his second sister, interjected.

“I do. Facebook notifies me of everything. And he sent me a message to let me know I’m not going to see him till Christmas.”

“Bahamas,” his mom scoffed as she convinced her grandkids to return to their seats, “what kind of place is that for Thanksgiving? I bet they won’t even have turkey or pie.”

“Let him be, Flo,” their dad intervened. “He’ll see how it is there, and once he realizes the Bahamas have nothing on your pumpkin pie, he’ll repent.”

That seemed enough for their mom because she went back to smiling broadly. “You go to your room and leave your luggage,” she told Maddox.

Emma was there with her husband, and although he had yet to see Sophia anywhere, his mom informed him that she was in her room with her fiancé, apparently making up after a bit of a row concerning his choice of dress shirts.

“I’m telling you, Sophia’s lucky that boy Marcus is so patient,” she commented while she pushed Maddox up the stairs. “I swear that she still needs to get her head screwed on straight. I don’t know why she’s so hardheaded.”

Maddox had his theory about that, one shared by his dad and almost everyone else, but he kept his mouth shut. His mom would deny that Sophia was, basically, her spitting image. Funny how she was the only one who failed to see the uncanny resemblance. His dad swore Sophia was his beloved spouse from head to toe at the same age.

There was still someone he had yet to hear about. “What about Alicia?” She was the youngest daughter and Maddox’s best friend while growing up, seeing how they had been born only two years apart.

“She’s here,” his mom said. “Holed up in her room, getting in touch with the universe. I won’t even start to pretend I understand what’s going on in there. As long as there aren’t any drugs involved, I’m happy. I must be,” she added, very matter-of-factly.

So Alicia was getting sucked into a new hobby. One thing Maddox loved about his sister was her special ability or strength to find something new and fall in love with it at a frightening speed, but with a clockwork regularity.

“In three months’ time, she’ll be into something else,” he stated.

“True enough. Tomorrow, we’ll have the traditional Thanksgiving dinner, but that doesn’t mean that we’ll go hungry today. So just freshen up that pretty face of yours,” she said, pinching his cheek once they were on the landing, “and then get downstairs. I want to hear everything about what you’ve been up to since we last saw you.”

Maddox felt what he'd been up to dangling on the tip of his tongue but stopped himself. Jonathan was right. The fact that he had a boyfriend now, and they were as serious as they could get after their short time together, wasn't the kind of thing to blurt out while his mom was going down the stairs and throwing over her shoulder not to take forever and make her come get him, when dinner was going to be ready in half an hour tops.

Maybe he'd just call Jonathan later and talk to him for a bit. Hmm, but he'd probably ask if Maddox had broken the news yet to his mom and dad. Better to wait until he talked to his parents, and then call Jonathan. That sounded like a better plan.

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"So, we're going to be cooking it tomorrow? Since that's when Thanksgiving is?" Rusty asked while opening the freezer and pointing proudly at the poultry wrapped up snugly in its plastic packaging.

"We could also roast it today, then carve it and just warm it up tomorrow. Some chefs say it's a better method if it works for you since the meat will become tenderer and tastier."

Rusty nodded in a professional manner as if he knew exactly what Jonathan was talking about. Then he grabbed the frozen turkey with both hands. "Oh, fuck, it's stuck."

"What do you mean?" Jonathan peeked over his shoulder.

"Grab me and pull," Rusty suggested in a tone that said that it wasn't as much a suggestion as an order.

"Your freezer is a bit too small," Jonathan said. "Make way, let me see. Ah, I think it got stuck to the bottom."

"Yeah, we need to pull it out." Rusty grabbed the turkey again and put one foot against the door for balance. He grunted as he struggled. "Hamilton, a little help here."

Jonathan took Rusty by the shoulders and guided him away from the freezer. "There are other, less brutal, methods."

Although he got a suspicious look in return for his remark, Rusty plopped himself down on a chair and watched him expectantly.

Jonathan observed the problem carefully. "Do you have any salt?"

"There's some of that somewhere," Rusty said and gestured vaguely. "Do you need pepper, too? Are you going to start cooking it while it's still frozen?"

Jonathan huffed in disbelief and turned to face Rusty. He wasn't making fun this time around. Jonathan shook his head. "I need salt to get it unstuck. Forget it, I'll try only with some hot water first."

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"Hey, stranger." Alicia jumped on his back, and it looked like he had to carry her like that to the table. Her hair was dyed a deep shade of black, so intense that it looked like a black hole ready to swallow the universe. Maddox doubted Alicia was trying as much to get in touch with it, as their mom thought, as to devour it completely. He had yet to figure out if she was trying a retro goth look or if there was some other, more obscure reason behind her dark clothes and dark makeup. Unlike him, who had inherited his dad's darker complexion, Alicia's skin was as white as snow, so the contrast between her face and the rest of her was on the disturbing side. But sticking out and being shocking to everyone around her was Alicia's way of being, and her family never thought she was anything out of the ordinary, no matter what clothes she chose to wear or how she changed her makeup.

"Hey, creature of the night," he replied while he walked down the stairs, tipping her dangerously close to the rail, just to mess with her.

Alicia smacked him on the head. "Quit playing, jerk."

Maddox peered around the corner to see if everyone else was already seated. By the flurry of activity around the table, there was still time for a detour, so he veered away, going in the opposite direction.

"Where are you dragging me off to, monster?" his sister asked in a cavernous voice.

"I need to ask you something."

He couldn't explain why he felt so nervous about talking to his parents about Jonathan all of a sudden. Apparently, some of his boyfriend's cautiousness was starting to rub off on him. The middle ground was to talk to Alicia first. So, he walked outside with her and then closed the door behind them. After he planted her on the stairs, he took a deep breath to prepare.

"All right," she said and looked him up and down carefully. "You kidnapped me for a reason."

"Kidnapped, right," he said with a snort.

She punched him playfully in the shoulder. "What's going on, player? No, don't tell me. You got a girl pregnant." She gasped theatrically and covered her mouth to mask her horrified surprise.

"No, what the fuck?" Maddox groaned. "I always use condoms."

"Ah, well, if you didn't knock up some girlfriend, nothing can shock me."

“You sure?” Maddox quirked an eyebrow and looked at his sister.

Alicia narrowed her eyes. “Did you rob a bank?”

Maddox gaped at her. “Rob a bank? What the hell?”

Alicia grinned and pinched his cheek. “You’d look awesome as a bandit. Or as a pirate. I haven’t decided yet. Now, shoot, what’s this thing you think is going to shock me or whatever?”

Maddox pulled out his phone and flipped through it. Then, he showed her the picture without another word. Alicia threw him a puzzled look and then took his phone. Before he had time to protest, she flipped to the next pic and then her eyebrows shot so far up that they could have been glued to her hairline. “Who’s this frigging beauty, Em?”

The fact that Alicia called him Em was a matter of intense debate in the family, since their sister Emma wanted to insist there be no confusion about their names. However, Alicia always did whatever the hell she wanted.

Maddox tried to get the phone away from her, but now she was like a dog with a bone. Her skinny frame was also responsible for how quick she could be, so she easily dodged him and then cradled the phone to her chest. Her heavily made up eyes stared at him, and she was half smiling, while blinking hard. She attempted a short nervous laugh. “O.M.G.,” she said slowly. “He’s your boyfriend!”

“Hush.” He gestured at her, and she covered her mouth, while her eyes remained still half-confused, half-amused. “Do you want them all to hear?”

Alicia dropped her hand, then chewed on her lower lip and stared at the picture on Maddox’s phone with a ravenous look. “The way he looks at you,” she said while examining the pic from all angles. “He’s totally in love with you.”

Maddox felt the corners of his lips curling up of their own accord. “You really think so?”

“Totally,” Alicia confirmed. “Are you going to tell mom and dad?”

“Yeah.” Maddox rubbed the back of his neck. “I thought it would be easy, but now that I’m home, and everyone’s--”

“Their usual selves,” Alicia supplied dutifully and right away.

“Yeah,” Maddox admitted, “yeah.” He didn’t even know how to explain what he was feeling. “I feel like I might be dropping a little bomb on them. And I need to have mom and dad, you know, apart from everyone else, when I tell them. Not that I want to keep it a secret from everyone else,” he added quickly, “but this feels like something I need to talk to them about first.”

“You talked to me first,” Alicia pointed out.

“You don’t count. You’re basically my twin who decided to get born two years before the correct date.”

“Yeah, totally right,” she admitted. “Although you’re the one who was two years late,” she took care to add.

“What do you think they’ll say? Will they like Jonathan?” he asked, feeling anxious and suddenly ready to blast the dinner before Thanksgiving by yelling that he had a boyfriend from the top of his lungs.

“Jonathan,” Alicia said slowly. “Who wouldn’t like a guy like him? He’s so frigging posh, though, Em. Is he a prince or something?”

Only Alicia would use the word ‘posh’ with a British accent completely out of the blue like that.

“We don’t have royal families in this country,” Maddox pointed out.

“I know,” Alicia said, rolling her eyes. “But he could be from overseas, right?”

“He’s not a foreigner,” Maddox said.

“Not your average college student, either,” Alicia said. “Where did you find him?”

“He transferred to Sunny Hill this year,” Maddox explained.

“And knocked you right off your feet.” Alicia closed one eye and pointed an invisible gun at him while clucking her tongue to simulate pulling the trigger.

“Something like that,” Maddox breathed out.

“Why do you sound so disappointed?” Alicia asked.

“I thought you’d be more shocked than this,” he said.

Alicia shrugged. “You know I’m un-shockable. Also, when you were four, you cried a river when Emma told you that you couldn’t marry Finch Rivers because he’s a boy just like you.”

“Who the hell is Finch Rivers? Are you making this up?” He had no recollection of anything like that.

“Maybe you were three,” Alicia said and patted her index fingers against her lips. “Anyway, if I think hard enough, I believe that there were signs.”

“Well, if you do remember stuff like that, share,” he said, a bit dumbfounded by his sister’s unfathomable logic.

“I will,” she said promptly and handed him back his phone. “Anyways, how come you fell for this guy? Although, I suppose that half of that school is at his feet right now.”

“Not really,” Maddox replied. “He’s a guy who likes to keep to himself a lot.”

“Ah,” Alicia sighed dreamily. “So cool. So my type.”

“Your type?” Maddox asked, a bit perplexed. “You’re talking about my boyfriend, Weird Al.” He used the annoying nickname on purpose.

But Alicia shrugged her shoulders like she couldn’t be bothered. “Just in case you don’t want him anymore at some point, I say let’s keep him in the family.”

He knew Alicia was just pulling his leg, but he couldn’t stop the annoyance he sensed growing inside him from leaking out. “Why wouldn’t I want him anymore?”

Alicia stared at him and held his gaze to make sure that they were locked in a battle of wills. “Because,” she said slowly, “your track record says that the average expiration date for your flings is around three weeks, and I’m being generous.”

“I’ve been with Jonathan longer than three weeks,” Maddox said, feeling affronted, but not entirely. His sister had a point. Everyone who knew him thought more or less the same.

“Good for you,” Alicia said promptly. “But is it infatuation? Or are you really falling in love?”

“The latter,” he said through his teeth.

“Are you sure?” Alicia asked him and narrowed her eyes again.

Maddox groaned and ran his hands over his eyes. “Why does everyone question it?”

Alicia patted him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, baby bro,” she said. “It’s just that we’re already at an age when everyone around us expects to know us by now. If I told you I wanted to go around the world in a balloon, what would you think?”

“That you’re totally going to do it,” Maddox said.

“Exactly,” Alicia replied. “But what if I told you that I’m getting married next week with a corpo suit for brains, and I want to have two point two children?”

He stopped and searched Alicia’s face for signs that she was joking. Apparently, that was the only answer she needed.

“See what I mean? It’s all about expectations, no matter what they are.”

He nodded. “I see. So, what do you think mom and dad will say?”

“Let’s catch them after dinner tonight,” Alicia offered. “I mean, I won’t intrude or anything, but I’ll be right behind the door.”

“Thanks, sis. Sorry for calling you Weird Al.”

“Don’t worry, bozo. I like that nickname. It makes me sound like I’d be fun at parties.”

“Which you are,” he pointed out.

She let out a heartfelt sigh. “That’s what everyone expects of me. Now, let’s go eat ‘cause I’m famished.”

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Rusty observed him quietly from a corner. After he had managed to drop a knife, ruined the stuffing once by pouring salt all over Jonathan’s hands, and twice by dropping way too much pepper into it, he had taken the order to just sit aside very much to heart.

“You don’t have to sit so far away,” Jonathan said. “I had no idea you would be so clumsy when you’re actually so adept at many other things.”

Rusty pursed his lips and looked so chastised that Jonathan started searching his brain for something to comfort him.

“Which reminds me, what’s the deal with the singing?” he asked. “I don’t understand why you don’t let your friends know about it. Or do they know?”

“They don’t,” Rusty replied. “And you better not tell them.”

“All right, all right, I won’t. I promise. But do you think you could tell me why that is? I mean, I seriously doubt Maddox, Kane, and Dex would think anything less of you. Actually, they would think a great deal more.”

“Why?” Rusty questioned while cocking his head, but pulling his chair a little closer.

“Because you’re truly talented, and you have real passion. Such things tend to inspire admiration in most people.”

“But not in all,” Rusty pointed out.

Jonathan had a feeling that he was getting closer to the real crux of the matter. “Yes, that’s true,” he admitted. “Did anyone tell you that you shouldn’t sing?”

Rusty nodded. Jonathan didn’t press the matter and pretended to be busy rubbing the turkey with the little butter they had discovered in the depths of the fridge and luckily, not expired.

“I used to sing at the local church where I lived before I moved with my mom to where Maddox and the others are from,” Rusty eventually said. He was twiddling his thumbs and looking down.

“You were a choir boy? Really?” Jonathan hoped his amused smile would lighten the mood a bit.

“Yeah.” Rusty snorted. “Until I was like eleven. Then I stopped singing. Pretended to have become tone deaf overnight.”

“And did anyone think you were telling the truth?” Jonathan asked.

“They had to. They thought that since every other dude’s voice changed, mine must have just changed for the worse.”

“But what prompted you to pretend—I’m sorry, I shouldn’t pry.”

“It’s all right. You know too much already.” Rusty quirked an eyebrow like that was enough to intimidate Jonathan. “When my dad left my mom, they had the biggest row ever. I listened. Apparently, me being nurtured to become some pansy ass boy,” Rusty made the air quotes with his fingers, “was why they fought so much.”

“Oh. Did your dad accuse your mom of that?”

Rusty nodded. “I didn’t turn out the way either of them wanted me to be.”

“We seldom do, it seems,” Jonathan said and looked down, as he remembered his earlier conversation with his own parent. “But was that enough to convince you to give up on your talent?”

“No. But it convinced me to hide it.” Rusty picked up a piece of celery from the table and began munching on it, absent-mindedly. Jonathan didn’t have the heart to stop him.

“While you were still a kid, sure,” Jonathan said. “But now? You could--”

“Nope,” Rusty contradicted him. “Not until I finish college. My dad’s the sponsor.”

“Oh. You think he’d stop supporting you if he knew?”

“Totally,” Rusty confirmed.

“I see. But still, you’re not letting anyone else know, either. I mean, why not tell Maddox and the rest of the guys?”

“They like me the way I am,” Rusty explained. “And you’re not letting anyone else know what you’re really scared of, right?”

Jonathan recoiled. How could an airhead like Rusty see through him like that? “Touché, I guess,” he murmured.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to ask you.”

“I should tell you. You told me your secret,” Jonathan said, “It would only be fair.”

Rusty put both his hands up. “No, I don’t want you to tell me anything just because you feel obligated or something. Too many people suspect that I’m some kind of contributor to Xpress anyway.”

“Why would they think that?”

“Don’t you know? I’m like their total darling or some shit. There’s never something bad about me in there. That’s why I’m the king.”

“Still, it’s not like I’d suspect you of that.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it. But it would be nicer if you’d be honest about whether you want to share your secrets right now with me or not. And you better tell Maddox everything first, right?”

Jonathan nodded. Too bad no one seemed to know this side of Rusty, the serious one, who could read people like they were open books. Maybe that was what made him a true artist, as much in hiding as he was. “Yes, I would like to share everything with Maddox first. Thank you for that, Rusty.”

“Come on, let’s not make this so serious,” Rusty said and picked up another piece of celery. “I’m so hungry. Is that turkey going to take a lot longer?”

“Yes, quite a bit. Just eat this.” Jonathan pushed a plate with some lunch leftovers he had packed from his place, toward Rusty. “It’s not a lot, but it should keep you fed until later. And we’re not going to eat turkey today. We’ll wait until tomorrow, okay?”

Rusty nodded. He didn’t seem very happy with that prospect, but he looked like someone who knew a thing or two about boundaries, as strange as that seemed.

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Maddox waited until everyone else was headed to sleep, except for his mom and dad. And Alicia, of course, who lay in wait behind the door, as promised. His sister always kept her promises, and that’s why he was sure that she was there.

His parents exchanged a short look when he grabbed the plates from his mom’s hands to put them away.

“Is there something on your mind, pumpkin?” his mom asked first.

Maddox leaned against the kitchen counter. “There’s something I want to tell you.”

His dad hovered closer. “Trouble at school? Is the tuition going up again?”

“No, nothing like that.”

“You know you can ask us for anything. We’ll always help,” his dad said.

“You don’t have to worry about that. No, it’s something else.”

His mom nodded thoughtfully. “Girl trouble? Did you get some girlfriend pregnant?”

An internal eye roll was probably not enough, but it had to do. “Mom, really, I know how to use a condom.”

“I know you do, but maybe you love this girl very much,” his mom said patiently, “and now she’s expecting.”

The most shocking part of it all was that his parents didn’t seem troubled at all if that were the case.

“No one’s pregnant,” he said quickly. He could swear his parents almost looked disappointed. Just how much did they like having kids around the house, breaking stuff, and causing chaos at every opportunity? And weren’t Vern’s enough already?

“Then what is it?” his dad asked.

Maddox pulled out his phone and showed them the picture, just as he had done with Alicia earlier. Both his parents moved closer, but they didn’t snatch his phone like his crazy sister had. They just looked very intently. His mom was the first to react. “Are you friends with a European prince?”

Maddox could swear he heard a low snicker from behind the kitchen door. Alicia better keep her pie hole shut. “He’s not a European prince, mom,” he moaned. “You know that.” His mom had a thing for the trials and tribulations of the royal houses of Europe, so it wasn’t possible for her to think something like that unless she really didn’t understand what she was seeing. “He’s my boyfriend,” he said. “His name is Jonathan, and he’s--”

“Wait,” his mom stopped him. She exchanged a shocked look with his dad. “Boyfriend? You mean friend? Like Rusty, Kane, or Dexter?”

“No, not like them.”

His mom put her hands on her hips. “It’s not April Fool’s, Maddox.” If she said his name like that, it meant that she meant business, and not the pleasant kind.

“How did you move from girlfriends,” his dad made a big circle with his hands as if to encompass the large number of females that Maddox had had casual flings with – it was a stretch to even call them girlfriends – “to a boyfriend?”

“I just did,” he snapped and regretted it immediately. “It happened,” he added quickly. “He’s very handsome and--”

“We can see that he’s very handsome,” his mom interrupted him. “Is this the sort of thing they call college experimentation?” She said the word like it had something to do with running around with aliens.

“No, it’s not like that,” Maddox hurried to assure her.

“People don’t just turn gay overnight,” his father interjected. “Do they, dear?” he consulted his wife with a confused look.

“Not my son, he doesn’t,” she said and frowned, giving Maddox a stern look.

For a moment, he didn’t think he heard her right. After all his telling Jonathan about how open-minded his family was, this came like a knock to the head. He had trouble speaking for a few seconds; he didn’t know what to say. “Why not?”

His mother narrowed her eyes. There came that hardheadedness she only saw and pointed out in others. “Because you’re not gay, Maddox. Did you get in a row with your girlfriend and now believe that boys are better? I know that relationships can be difficult, but you don’t cut and run at the first problem.”

“I didn’t get in a row with anyone,” Maddox said through his teeth. “And I don’t have a girlfriend. I’ve never even had one serious relationship until now. When did I ever tell you that? They were just girls who came and went.”

His father gave him a very disappointed look. “That’s no way to treat girls, Maddox.”

He groaned. How could they be like this? It was like they weren’t even his parents anymore. Since they couldn’t have been replaced by aliens, there was only one explanation for their reaction. They were, as much as Maddox found it hard to believe, really obtuse. “We just had fun, and they knew it. Heck, they chased me down only for that.”

“Did I raise you to be so full of yourself?” his mom scolded him.

“Wait, dear,” his dad intervened. “Maybe there’s just a bit of confusion here. Maddox must admire this young man, and he may be mistaking the desire to be like him--”

Maddox decided that he needed to stop his dad and his convoluted explanations. “I don’t desire to be like him,” he said pointedly. “I want to be with him.”

His mom's eyes had grown so narrow now they had turned into slits. "Did you have sex with him?"

Maddox threw his arms in the air. "I'm not going to answer that. There are limits, even with nosy parents like you two."

"Yes, there are limits," his mom agreed, something that wasn't reflected in her tone of voice, "and one of them is that you're not gay. Stop it with this nonsense. Is this young man gay? All out in the open or however they say it these days?"

"Yes, he is," Maddox replied, not really getting what she was aiming for with that.

"So why are you leading him on?"

"I'm not doing that! And whatever happened, no matter how strange you think it is, it's because I love him!" He hadn't intended to say so much or shout it so loudly, so the silence that fell after his angry words sucked the air out of his lungs for a moment.

The next, the kitchen door blasted open, and all his siblings poured through, shouting all at the same time.

### *Chapter Thirty-Four – What Siblings Are For*

Their parents appeared to be just as taken aback as Maddox was by the furious crowd pouring into the kitchen. After a few calls for quiet from their dad, and one, very prompt, hand slap on the counter from their mom, finally, his siblings quieted down some. Not completely, and the first to talk was Alicia. “Mom, dad, can’t you see? Maddox’s totally crazy about Jonathan!”

“His name is Jonathan?” Sophia asked. “What’s his family name?”

“Is that the most important detail here?” Vern intervened. “Maddox, is this your idea of a joke?”

Of course, Vern would side with his parents, given how serious he had grown up to be. Throughout his childhood, Vern had been his idol and hero. Given the fourteen years between them, he couldn’t be anything else. He wasn’t that right now, though, and Maddox felt a pang in his chest, like he was losing something important all of a sudden. “It is not a joke,” he told his oldest brother.

Vern pursed his lips and stared at him with hard eyes. While Sophia was the younger version of their mom, Vern carried the strongest resemblance to their dad.

To his surprise, Vern turned calmly toward their parents. “If Maddox says it’s not a joke, then it’s not a joke. Because Maddox never lies when it’s about important things.”

That was his hero, yes, right there. Maddox wanted to hug him and thank him for being on his side.

“But he’s an incorrigible womanizer,” Sophia protested.

“And I have no idea what to wear to a gay wedding,” Emma moaned.

“What gay wedding?” Their mom raised her voice over them as they began to talk all at the same time. “There won’t be any gay wedding.”

“Really, mom?” Alicia asked and crossed her arms over her chest. “Of course, there will be a gay wedding.”

“I haven’t thought about it that far,” Maddox considered it a good moment to intervene. “And how come all of you are here? And why?”

Emma considered it proper that she should answer that. “When Al is lurking in corners, something interesting must be going on.”

So, from there, it must have spread like wildfire. There was an invisible connection between all the Kingsley siblings that Maddox was very much aware of, as well. When they got together, it was impossible to keep a secret. At least they left spouses and kids out of it, and for that, Maddox was grateful.

“Go back to your rooms,” their mom ordered in a loud voice. “This is something we must talk to Maddox about, just your father and I.”

“Like hell,” Alicia protested. “You’ll have to make me. And we’re too old for you to send to our rooms like that.”

“You’re never too old for me to still consider you kids,” their mom replied. “Maddox is just, what’s that word, dear?” She turned toward their dad.

“Confused?” Their dad replied, but he seemed to be the one confused by the whole thing.

“Yes, that,” their mom said. “And we’re going to sort him out right now. But without you here.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Alicia said. “Vern, she cannot make us go to our rooms, right?”

“We’re here for Maddox,” Vern confirmed. “And we’d like to hear what he has to say, as well.”

“And we want to see Jonathan, too,” Emma added eagerly, with stars in her eyes.

Maddox made a move to hand over the phone, but his mom caught his hand. “Don’t you dare,” she warned him.

That was something he couldn’t understand, but allowed his mom to take the phone out of his hand. “Why?” he asked.

“Because he’s too handsome, and it’s easy to get these airheads,” she pointed at his sisters, “thinking that you’re about to marry into some royal family.”

Emma let out a gasp of surprise. “What are you saying? Al, you weren’t just talking shit, were you?”

Alicia stared at Emma triumphantly. “When do I ever talk shit?”

“Stop using the word ‘shit’ in my kitchen,” their mom boomed over the animated conversation that seemed to have been triggered by Alicia’s comment.

“Sorry, mom,” both Emma and Alicia said in unison.

“Really, is that all you care about?” Sophia gestured wildly. “That this dude looks like a prince? Hello, how about the elephant in the room?”

“Don’t be annoying, So-so,” Alicia counterattacked, using the most annoying nickname she had ever come up with for her sister. “And dad is not that fat.”

That prompted a snicker from Emma, and Maddox could swear even Vern covered half his face for a moment. No, their dad was in good shape for his age, but he might have gained a bit of girth during the past few years since he had started leaving Vern in charge of the construction

company. Both his parents deserved more free time, but it looked like their dad was indulging a bit too freely in their mom's awesome cooking lately.

Obviously sensitive to his kids' remarks, their dad sucked in his belly and stared at them, all wide-eyed and ready to bolt.

"This isn't about your dad," their mom stopped them. "This is about Maddox and his sudden decision to shock us. It isn't like you to do such a thing." Apparently, she had already forgotten about how she wanted them out of there, save for Maddox.

"Right, because if it's not aligned with your picture perfect idea of a family, then it doesn't exist," Alicia protested in his stead. "Maybe Maddox could get his beautiful boyfriend pregnant, and then you'll finally be happy."

"Alicia Boadicea Carolina Kingsley!" They all shut up at the same time and stared at their dad. Alicia tried to play brave, but anyone could see she was wavering already. "Go to your room. Now," he added.

Alicia turned on her heel.

"And think about how you're going to apologize to your mother," he called after her.

Not even Alicia dared to slam the door after her. Long moments after she was out of the room, they remained silent, just stealing glances at one another. Vern patted Emma and Sophia on their shoulders. "Let's go. Maddox needs to talk this through with mom and dad."

Maddox stared after his siblings and felt a new kind of weight crushing his chest. He appreciated Alicia being on his side, but her volcanic temperament was getting her in trouble more often than not. And now, their dad was really pissed at her, and that said a lot.

"You, too, Maddox. Go to sleep," his dad said.

"But--"

"No 'buts'. We'll talk tomorrow some more. But before that, we'll have a family Thanksgiving dinner. Your mom didn't work this hard for any of you to make a mess out of it. Good night."

Maddox knew better than to antagonize his dad when he got like that. He knew that their dad loved all of them, but he also cared about their mom, and he could tell that Alicia's words had been too harsh, as much as they must have been meant as some sort of joke. He retrieved his phone, wished them good night in a subdued voice, and headed out of the kitchen.

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"Aren't you too hot?" Jonathan looked at Rusty, who still wore the sweater he had given him earlier.

“Do you want it back?” Rusty asked while he felt the fabric by rubbing his hands over his belly.

“No, it’s not about that. I was just wondering if you’re not hot with the sweater still on.”

“I’m hot either in or out of sweaters,” Rusty said promptly.

Jonathan chuckled and shook his head in mirth. “I don’t doubt that.”

“I’ve never had anything as nice as this,” Rusty commented as he continued to examine the cable knit pattern like he could read some ancient spell in it. “It’s cashmere or something, right?”

“Yes.” Jonathan didn’t want to comment on how having nice things didn’t mean anything if you didn’t have the rest, like a supportive family. It would have been an unkind thing to say, seeing how Rusty had had such a hard time growing up with his parents splitting up and him left to wonder whether it had been his fault or not. Actually, he wasn’t even wondering, most probably. At least he, Jonathan, had nice sweaters. “Feel free to keep it if you like.”

“For real?” Rusty’s eyes lit up like a Christmas tree. He could be such a kid sometime. It made Jonathan want to spoil him a little, even though they weren’t friends.

“It looks great on you.” The hunter green really brought out Rusty’s eyes.

“I’ll give it back,” Rusty promised. “Only not right now. I’m going to spend Thanksgiving in it. And I’ll wash it and stuff.”

“Better not,” Jonathan said brightly. Something told him Rusty was as adept at washing sweaters as he was around the kitchen. And it wasn’t about ruining a sweater he didn’t give a damn about. He just didn’t want Rusty to panic over something like that when it happened. “I mean, it’s fine. And my offer still stands. If you like it just as much after Thanksgiving, please keep it.”

“It’s a bit tight across the chest,” Rusty argued, but by the way he was smiling, Jonathan could tell he liked the idea.

“Yes, you have a more muscular build compared to me,” Jonathan said courteously.

Rusty was about to say something, when Jonathan’s phone started ringing.

“It’s Maddox,” Jonathan said, and his lips quirked into a fond smile.

Rusty jumped theatrically over the sofa and hid behind it. “I’m not here!” he announced.

Jonathan still held the phone without answering. “All right, but why are you--”

Rusty’s head appeared over the sofa for a moment. “In case you want to go all smoochy-smoochy over a video call,” he explained and ducked behind the furniture again.

Jonathan pursed his lips, but he couldn't argue with Rusty. He would insist that he at least confide in Maddox, who was his closest friend. But for now, he had a more pressing matter than that. "Hi," he said and walked out of the living room.

"Hi," Maddox's voice came through.

Jonathan immediately sensed a certain tension in his boyfriend's voice. "Maddox," he said gently, "what's the matter?" He dropped his voice to a whisper.

"You can tell, right? You can tell that something's the matter."

"Yes, but--"

"I screwed it up somehow. I mean, I didn't, but somehow I did."

"What are you talking about?"

"I kept telling you my parents would be totally fine... and well, they're not fine. I mean, they're fine in the sense that they're healthy and everything. They're just not fine with me being with you."

Jonathan let his shoulders drop. He wasn't particularly surprised. He didn't know Maddox's parents, and the chances were that they would remain strangers for a long time, but to hear something like that out of the blue couldn't have sat well with them. "Take it easy," he said the first thing that came to mind. "Give them some time."

Maddox scoffed at the other end. "I thought they were the coolest parents in the universe." That was how children who had never been betrayed in their beliefs about their parents talked at the first sign that the adults in their life were actually different from what they thought. Jonathan had been there. He had trusted his folks with all his heart.

"They are still that," he offered as consolation. "But seeing how you've never before even liked a boy that way--"

"They should have been cool with it," Maddox said obstinately. "But it doesn't mean a thing. I mean, for us. When the time comes, maybe we just elope or something."

The word 'elope' sounded not quite at home in Maddox's mouth, yet Jonathan felt a pleasant warmth spreading through his chest. They were both getting a bit too romantic for their own good, right? That little voice inside his head called his feelings to order right away.

"Whatever, I'm not going to change, no matter what they say," Maddox added. "How about you? Can you talk? How are your parents?"

"They must be well, I mean, they were when I talked to my dad on the phone earlier." Jonathan took a deep breath. "I didn't go, after all. I just felt it was too soon."

“Then where are you now?”

“I’m at the campus.”

“All alone?”

Jonathan hesitated for a moment. Would it be that much of a betrayal to tell Maddox about Rusty? It surely felt that way.

The decision was taken from his hands when Maddox continued to talk. “I should come back, too, and spend Thanksgiving with you.”

“Maddox, no. Your parents love you very much. You wouldn’t have grown up into the awesome guy you are today without them. Spend the holidays with them, and show them that you love them, too.” He surely was big on giving advice. A sudden pang of loneliness gripped his chest. As out of place as displays of affections were considered in his family, he wanted nothing more right now than to hug his dad. Or maybe just share a handshake, regardless of how things stood between them.

“You’re too nice for this century,” Maddox said and laughed softly. “You know what? I’m going to wear them down. Yeah, I’m going to convince them. And then, they’ll be happy to have you as their son-in-law.”

“Son-in-law?” Jonathan asked, rightly nonplussed.

“Sorry, sorry, it’s just that my sisters put strange ideas in my head. Forget what I said,” Maddox said quickly.

“You told your sisters?”

“I only told Al, but well, it’s not like I could keep the rest of them in the dark. The good news is even Vern is convinced I tell the truth about us being boyfriends and serious, too. Only Sophia is a pain in the butt, but that’s because she didn’t see you.”

“The rest saw me?” Jonathan asked, experiencing a tickling sensation at the back of his neck. He couldn’t imagine the kind of house Maddox had grown up in, so different from his own.

“Only Al. And of course, I showed that pic of us to mom and dad. Now, everyone is convinced you’re some kind of prince in hiding.”

“Oh, yes, surely, that’s me,” Jonathan commented dryly.

Maddox snickered like a naughty kid. “You could be that, for all I know.”

Jonathan sighed. There were still things between them, things they had to talk about. But they had time, so there was no reason to hurry. Of course, none of them was that he was a prince. “I can tell you, without the shadow of a doubt, that I’m of no royal blood.”

“As good as. I bet your folks have a huge mansion and stuff. And horses.”

“A few, yes,” Jonathan confirmed.

“No way, Jose,” Maddox said excitedly. “For real?”

“Yes. I’ll take you there some day,” Jonathan promised. It wasn’t only up to Maddox to wear down his family; that was a good task for him, as well. And if they claimed to be all right with him being gay, they would have to accept Maddox as his boyfriend.

“Awesome. So, can you ride?”

“Yes.”

“Cool. I have such a cool bf,” Maddox said and laughed some more.

There was already an important difference from the way he had sounded at the beginning of the call. Jonathan felt better, too. Maddox was all sunshine, and he should stay that way.

“Someone’s about to pester me,” Maddox added, “by threatening to take down the door. Talk to you soon.”

“Sure.” Jonathan stopped himself before adding words that almost rolled naturally from his tongue. “Goodbye,” he added, a bit too rigidly.

“Bye, babe,” Maddox drawled in the most sexy voice he had, making Jonathan feel uncontrollable giddiness taking over.

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“Come in already,” Maddox called out, a bit annoyed that he had to cut short his conversation with Jonathan. If it were Alicia, he would make sure she’d get an earful about being so annoying.

To his surprise, Vern was the one to come through the door. But, of course, with Alicia in tow. Maddox rolled his eyes, but gestured for them to come in. Alicia plopped herself down on his bed and bounced a few times. “You always had the best bed,” she said with a crooked smile.

“What are you guys doing here? If mom knew you were here--”

“That’s why I dragged him out of bed,” Alicia pointed at their brother.

Vern grabbed a chair and sat down, then leaned forward, steepling his fingers and watching Maddox intently. “How’s it going, Bug?” That nickname had stuck with Maddox since before he

could remember. Apparently, he had liked bugging his oldest brother the most, and Vern had been at the receiving end of all the ‘whys’ and ‘why-nots’ for the longest time.

“Well, you know,” Maddox said and hunched his shoulders.

Vern reached for him and squeezed his left arm in sympathy. “They’ll come around.”

“Will they?” he asked.

“Yeah. I’ve known them longer than all of you,” Vern said and smiled. “Now that they’re not here, how about you tell us more about Jonathan?”

“Yes, yes, tell us more about Jonathan,” Alicia insisted as if he hadn’t agreed.

Maddox rubbed the back of his neck and grinned. “He transferred to Sunny Hill at the beginning of this year. He’s a junior, too. And I got into a bit of conflict with him on the first day.”

“Enemies to lovers,” Alicia declared and made a gesture with her hands as if to frame a title.

“We weren’t enemies,” Maddox protested. “Thing is, I just couldn’t stop thinking about him. So, I arranged to work on the statistics project with him.”

“Don’t tell me,” Alicia grabbed his arm hard, “that he’s just a pretty face. Ha, that must be how you managed to fool him. But, I suppose that a poor grade is still worth it.”

“Jeez, Al, you really like jumping to conclusions. No, he’s actually very smart. Perfect GPA level of smart.”

“That’s very good,” Vern said. “You should lead with that the next time you attempt to talk to mom and dad about him.”

“Apparently, they only care if he’s a girl, and he’s definitely not that. By the way, Al, so not cool what you said.”

“Hey, bozo, I’m on your side. And it’s not like you cannot have kids if you want,” his sister pointed out. “They’re just, ugh, so narrow-minded.”

“You will still apologize, Alicia,” Vern said sternly.

Alicia squirmed a little under Vern’s pointed gaze. “All right, I will,” she said with a heartfelt sigh. “I just wanted to point out the obvious.”

“No, you were just trying to rile them up because that’s what you do,” Vern said in his parent voice. Maddox didn’t mind that since Vern was much older than they were.

However, Alicia didn’t seem to like that much because she stuck out her tongue at him.

“I rest my case,” Vern said with a grunt and a shake of the head.

“I didn’t mean to upset them,” Maddox said. “I really thought they would be fine with it.”

“They should have been,” Alicia interjected. “Sorry, I’ll shut up,” she added when Vern stared her down again. “But, V, you should totally see this dude. He’s like a fairytale prince.”

“Really?” Vern said dryly just to annoy Alicia. “Does he ride a white horse?”

“He rides horses,” Maddox said and puffed out his chest. “I have no idea if they’re white or something else, though.”

“He does?” Alicia’s voice rose so much that she slapped a hand over her mouth herself.

“Yeah,” Maddox replied with self-importance. He took out his phone. He wanted to show off his boyfriend to the entire world if possible.

Vern took the phone and looked at the pic for what seemed like a long time. “He is very handsome. You two look good together.”

“Right?” Alicia asked excitedly and bounced on the bed again. “But look at the other pic.” She leaned forward and dragged her finger quickly over the screen before Maddox could stop her. “See, V, see? Jonathan is totally head over heels with this bozo.”

“Why is he at Sunny Hill?” Vern asked probably the first pertinent question. “He looks like he would be attending one of the most important and expensive colleges in the country.”

Maddox felt his grin fading. “He had some trouble at the school he attended before.”

“What kind of trouble?”

It was Maddox’s turn to squirm under his brother’s intense stare. “This guy he was with, he got caught with something. And then he blamed it all on Jonathan.”

“Caught with something,” Vern said slowly. “We’re talking drugs.”

“Yes, but Jonathan doesn’t do stuff like that,” Maddox said defensively.

Alicia grabbed the phone from Vern’s hand and stared at the pic closely. “He looks too healthy to do that shit,” she concluded.

“Only that guy was doing it,” Maddox continued, more and more alarmed that it might be possible for the rest of the world to see the incident with different eyes. “Jonathan just happened to be with him.”

“Hmm,” Vern said in a non-committal manner. “I doubt he would have a perfect GPA if he did drugs. However, Maddox,” he added in his most serious voice, “how well do you know Jonathan?”

“Enough to know I like him very much.”

“You love him,” Alicia reminded him of his slip of the tongue. “That’s what you said,” she said quickly.

“That’s all well and good,” Vern continued, “but you should get to know him first. I believe that you believe that he was not to blame. And I doubt someone as prim and proper as he appears to be from this picture would use drugs. Nonetheless, there may be other things you should consider.”

“Like what?” Maddox asked, more aggressively than intended.

“For instance, if he’s as invested as you are in this relationship. As I see it, you took a big step by telling our parents about him. Did he do the same? Is he planning to, at least?”

“Planning to,” Maddox said quickly. “He told me one day he’ll take me to see his horses.”

By how Vern pursed his lips, he could tell it wasn’t the ideal answer. Yes, he had blurted out that he loved Jonathan and didn’t plan on taking it back, but did Jonathan feel the same? They behaved like boyfriends, they had lots of awesome sex, but it wasn’t like they had talked about feelings and all that.

“Not exactly the same thing,” Vern pointed out.

“It doesn’t matter,” Maddox replied. “He’ll do it in his own time. Plus, he barely talks to his folks. He is even spending Thanksgiving alone, at the campus, because of them.”

“Oh, no, all alone? Poor him,” Alicia said and cradled the phone to her chest. “You should have brought him with you.”

“That might have caused an even bigger ruckus,” Vern said, always the voice of reason. “These things must be thought through carefully.”

Maddox felt pretty miffed that Vern sounded so cautious in regard to Jonathan. “I bet no one would have been this worried if I had come home with a girl.”

“True,” Vern admitted. “You’ll have to put yourself in their shoes, though, Bug. They’ve always known you as someone who changed girlfriends faster than socks.”

“They weren’t girlfriends,” Maddox justified right away.

Vern waved like that wasn’t important. “We’re all surprised. Very surprised.”

“I’m not that surprised,” Alicia intervened.

“That’s because you wouldn’t be surprised if they said people landed on the sun tomorrow on the six o’clock news,” Vern countered her.

“Yeah,” she admitted without any hard feelings.

“And because of the element of surprise,” Vern continued unfazed, “it shouldn’t come as such a shock to you that they need time to process this new information. I, personally, would very much like to meet Jonathan.”

“Yeah, yeah, I want to meet him, too.” Alicia bounced on the bed again.

“I want him to meet everyone. He’s an only child and told me he cannot even imagine what it is like having so many siblings,” Maddox said.

Vern laughed. “I suppose it’s going to be quite a shock for him. We’ll just get Alicia to behave, and then his transition period to the Kingsley chaos will go smoothly.”

“I’m never going to behave,” Alicia promised and stood on the bed so that she could command the room from her position of power.

“We’ll see about that,” Vern said drily.

Maddox stood and then hugged his brother. Alicia jumped on his back, and he squeezed her arms, as well. “Thanks, guys. It’s good to know I have allies like you.”

Vern thumped his shoulder with his fist and smiled. “That’s what siblings are for, Bug. Don’t you forget that.”

“I won’t,” he promised. “Damn, I guess it’s going to be kind of an awkward Thanksgiving now because of me.”

“Don’t worry about that. We’ll have fun. And just let it all sink in gradually,” Vern advised him. “You’ll see that they will change their minds once they get used to the idea.”

“I really hope you’re right,” Maddox said. “Now how about you get out of here so that I can catch some sleep?”

“You’re going to sex-text Jonathan, right?” Alicia said, all knowingly.

He put her down and began pushing her toward the door. “I’m not,” he protested.

Alicia snickered but let him push her out of the room. Vern walked out of his own accord. “Sleep tight, Bug,” he said and ruffled Maddox’s hair on his way out.

### *Chapter Thirty-Five – Shooting For The Stars*

Jonathan pulled the blanket around his body and shivered. “Why on earth did I agree to this?”

Rusty lay on his back, hands behind his head, and sighed contentedly. “Because there’s no better view than this. You can’t really see the sky like this from your window, right?”

They were on the roof, and the temperature wasn’t that conducive to admiration of the night sky, but Rusty seemed happy to have someone to share this experience with, so a mild cold seemed like a small price to pay. He should have grabbed his coat on their way up, but Rusty had responded to that by throwing a blanket at him and ordering him to stop playing the delicate flower.

“Indeed,” Jonathan replied and looked up. The snow had slowed to nothing and only a few clouds obscured the stars now. It felt free to be there and gaze at the heavens in the company of one of the most peculiar yet fascinating people he had met in a long time.

“Hey, what’re your plans with Maddox?” Rusty asked the most serious question of all suddenly.

“What do you mean?” It took Jonathan an effort of will to turn his head and face Rusty.

“Are you in love with him?”

Jonathan cleared his throat. He hadn’t been expecting such a direct question, so he postponed answering by pretending to be enraptured with the night sky and avoiding Rusty’s stare.

“You should be,” Rusty continued, seemingly not annoyed by his silence. “Because Maddox is a really great guy.”

Jonathan nodded pensively. “Can you keep a secret, Rusty?”

“Cross my heart,” Rusty replied. “After all, you’re keeping mine. I’m all too willing for a trade.”

Jonathan took a deep breath. “I believe I am,” he said quietly.

“You’re what?” Rusty teased.

“In love with him,” Jonathan said quickly.

“With whom?”

“Dammit, Rusty, really?”

“Just say it. It’s only you and me here. And the stars,” Rusty pointed out. “Look, don’t say it to me, if you find it weird or something. Imagine that you’re alone, but say it out loud.”

Jonathan closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “The things you make me do.”

“I get that a lot.”

“I don’t doubt it for a second.”

“Come on, Hamilton, while it’s still today.”

Jonathan opened his eyes and stared at the sky above. “I’m in love,” he said, the words drawn painfully from his throat and vocal chords, “with Maddox Kingsley.” His heart was in his throat and he could feel the frantic pulse of his blood. Yet, at the same time, a weight lifted from his chest, and he felt like laughing and crying simultaneously. Maybe this was what it felt like when you were shooting for the stars.

All that came crashing to a halt when Rusty surprised him by smacking his back in encouragement. “See? That wasn’t so hard, was it? There are much, much harder things in life, like root canals, finals, and trying to rub your dick with a baseball mitt--”

Jonathan scoffed. “Jeez, Rusty, way to ruin a grand moment.” He hid his face in his palms and laughed, nonetheless. “Baseball mitt, really?”

“We only live once,” Rusty said matter-of-factly.

“I suppose you’re right,” Jonathan agreed.

“So, when are you going to tell Maddox that you’re in love with him?”

Jonathan looked down, at his hands resting in his lap. “I’ll have to think about it.”

“Why? Don’t dip your toe into the water, just jump,” Rusty suggested.

“That’s easy for you to say,” Jonathan said with a snort.

“Maddox won’t mind. Actually, I think he’s going to be uber happy to hear it.”

How could he explain it to Rusty, who, despite his kinky adventures, seemed to be such a pure soul? “I’ve said the words before,” he uttered with some difficulty. “I just want--”

He wanted what? To be sure? If he were honest with himself, he had fallen in love with Maddox probably at first sight, other knee-jerk reactions aside. More so, he wanted the words to mean something, not just to be thrown out between studying and hot lovemaking.

“It’s all right. I won’t pester you. For now,” Rusty warned him. “You’re going to sleep here tonight, right?”

“I should go back to my place,” Jonathan said immediately.

“Stay here,” Rusty insisted. “You can sleep in Maddox’s room. What better opportunity to snoop around and find his dirty secrets?”

“I have no intention of snooping,” Jonathan protested. “And something tells me that Maddox is not the kind to have dirty secrets.”

“At least he must have some dirty socks. Just in case you have that fetish.”

Jonathan groaned. “Rusty Parker, where do they make people like you?”

“Nowhere. I’m unique,” Rusty said with satisfaction. “So, sorry if you wanted a piece of me,” he joked. “I belong to the entire horny population of Sunny Hill, while you, well, you’re one guy’s dude.”

“The entire horny population of Sunny Hill?” Jonathan said slowly, willing to tease Rusty back a little. “Not only the females?”

“I’ve never done a dude,” Rusty said quickly.

“Really?” Jonathan drawled. “Never, never? How could you miss on that huge opportunity to add to your plethora of experimentations? I’m sure plenty of guys here, at Sunny Hill, wouldn’t mind at all if you asked.”

Rusty growled like an annoyed dog. “In case you don’t want me to start my experimentation with your gay ass, you better stop.”

Jonathan laughed. “I think I know you well enough now to not take your threats seriously.”

“I haven’t even threatened you yet,” Rusty protested.

“Exactly,” Jonathan said with satisfaction. “That’s who you really are. All bark and no bite.”

“I bite,” Rusty said promptly.

“Why am I not surprised?” Jonathan murmured under his breath. “I should go, though.”

“Nope, you’re sleeping in Maddox’s room.” Rusty grabbed his arm quickly. “Since you’re a neat freak, I’m sure you’ll make it look like you weren’t ever there at all, in case that’s what you’re worrying about. Plus, do you think you can leave me here, alone with the roasted turkey?”

“I suppose that’s not a risk I’m willing to take,” Jonathan said, wanting to be convinced some more. He was grinning despite himself.

“Good. Then it’s settled. And I promise you I’ll turn a blind eye if I stumble upon you sniffing something weird.”

Jonathan offered his hand to help Rusty to his feet, but then he promptly grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and squeezed hard. He wasn’t the type to touch strangers casually like that, but he could hardly consider Rusty a stranger now, given his earlier confessions.

“Ouch, ouch, ouch,” Rusty complained. “You have a mean streak in you, Hamilton, don’t you?”

“Trust me, you haven’t seen anything. And I think I need to hide that turkey meat anyway.”

“Aww, don’t be like that. I’m going to behave, cross my heart and hope to die.”

“Something tells me that I shouldn’t take any chances with you,” Jonathan said promptly. “But all right, maybe I’ll let you have a bite, just to see if it’s any good. It’s not like I’ve cooked a turkey before.”

“If you let me have some, I promise I’ll put in a good word for you with Maddox,” Rusty promised.

“I’m afraid to count on such recommendations. Maddox might find it pretty strange.”

“I’m his bestie,” Rusty reminded him. “So he’ll totally listen to me.”

Jonathan snorted. “Okay, bestie. Just don’t go overboard and tell him that I like sniffing socks and other strange things.”

“Too bad, that was a big part of my strategy for winning Maddox for you,” Rusty said and grinned.

“Inside, now.” Jonathan guided him by holding the back of his neck. “You can have a sandwich, but then you’re going to sleep.”

“But it’s early. We should hang out a little more,” Rusty pleaded.

“No. I need my beauty sleep,” Jonathan said airily.

“Hmm,” Rusty said, and once in the hallway, he turned and stared at him. “I think I can see some dark circles. Let’s not ruin your pretty face.”

Jonathan scowled. “Don’t you know guys don’t like being called pretty?”

“What guys? I like being called pretty.”

Taking in Rusty’s muscular arms, Jonathan thought that probably no one ever thought ‘oh, how pretty’, looking at the guy. He just shook his head. “Should I push you down the stairs now or later? Because you are sort of driving me nuts.”

“No need.” Rusty sat on the handrail and slid with ease to the ground floor. He then waved at Jonathan, his face split by a broad grin.

Jonathan could totally understand why Maddox liked Rusty, and why they were close friends. Together, they were probably making the world laugh.

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There should have been nothing strange about being inside Maddox's bedroom, since he had been there plenty of times before, but it felt like something new and somewhat exciting. Jonathan pushed himself off the bed and began looking at the books stacked in neat rows on the shelves. He grabbed one and browsed through it, smiling at the dog-eared pages. No one could accuse Maddox Kingsley of being nothing but a pretty face, for sure. As he picked up the books one by one, he could tell that Maddox had read them all. It had to be one of the reasons why they understood each other so well. Like him, Maddox was competitive, and he loved an intellectual challenge. He was hard working, intelligent, and kind-hearted.

And Jonathan couldn't help being in love with him. He grinned as he reached the last book on the last shelf to the right. On one of the first pages, Maddox had written one note on the side.

*I really don't get all this bs.*

Jonathan, slightly amused, returned to the cover. The topic was pretty dry, and Maddox must have gotten the book for an elective during his previous years of college. Somehow, he hadn't gotten around to getting rid of the book, though, and that gave Jonathan an idea. There were no dog-eared pages here.

He reached for a piece of paper on the desk, carefully folded it and ripped a square from it. Then, he sat down in the chair, and wrote five words, the most meaningful ever. While sticking the note between the pages, he was still smiling.

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"Why did you let me eat so much?" Rusty patted his belly and groaned.

Jonathan snickered. "Because I've never seen anyone capable of eating as much as you do, so fast. You basically didn't give me a chance to shake off my shock."

"Yeah, right," Rusty said with a scoff, but then he smiled. "You're an awesome cook, Hamilton. If the chemistry thing doesn't work out, go turn yourself into a chef or something. With your looks, you'll become a celebrity in no time."

"I'll bear that in mind," Jonathan said and smiled, as well. "Now, what would you like to do? I could endure watching sports if that's your thing."

"In this house," Rusty said solemnly, "we don't watch sports, we do them. Come on. Let's burn some of that turkey off."

Jonathan felt like lazing around for a bit after their meal, but it looked like Rusty wasn't the kind to take 'no' for an answer. "Who's going to do the dishes?"

Rusty groaned. “Live a little, dude. We’ll worry about that later, ‘kay?”

“We?” Jonathan quirked his eyebrows and gave his newfound friend a pointed look.

“You’ll do them,” Rusty said quickly and then tugged on his hand to make him get up from his chair.

Jonathan decided that leaving dirty dishes behind was irksome, but not enough so to prevent him from following Rusty and seeing what he had in mind as entertainment.

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“This is so incredibly unfair,” Jonathan complained as Rusty stole the ball from him for the umpteenth time and sent it through the hoop without even touching it. “And why are you so good at two things at the same time?”

“You’re one to talk, Hamilton,” Rusty teased him by moving the ball from one hand to the other, right in front of him as if he would give Jonathan a chance to snag it.

They had the whole campus to themselves, and that gave them free reign over the entire school property. However, Rusty had opted for a basketball court, and one outside, even. Jonathan was thankful for the workout, even though he was overdressed for the occasion. To see Rusty made so happy just by showing off his prowess on the field was a reward in itself.

“Is this about my cooking? It’s nothing that special, trust me.” He swallowed his words, as he realized he had been about to bring up things from the past, things that really didn’t matter now.

“That’s not what I’m talking about. And you can tell me about the five Michelin-star dinners you have had, ‘cause I don’t mind.”

“There is a maximum of only three Michelin stars a restaurant can have,” Jonathan corrected him.

“Underachievers,” Rusty said with a snort. “Whatever. I was talking about your special talent.”

“What’s my special talent?” Jonathan decided that it was no use to try and outrun Rusty, so he just lagged behind.

Rusty grinned at him as he performed half a pirouette, jumped, dunked the ball and remained hanging from the hoop for a few moments. “You flipped Mad Dawg,” he drawled.

Jonathan rolled his eyes. “Obviously, it was a one-time thing. I mean, I’ve never flipped anyone else.” Definitely not Drew, as much as he had tried at the time.

“You don’t fool me, gay boy.” Rusty walked over to him and stopped a hairsbreadth away.

Jonathan didn't flinch as Rusty stared him in the eyes. He was getting used to Rusty's antics, achieving familiarity at a frightening speed.

"I bet that you made doe eyes at him and told him, 'Would you awfully mind if I flipped you, Mr. Kingsley?'" Rusty said the last words nasally and made weird faces while at it.

Jonathan bit his lips trying not to laugh. "I don't talk like that."

Rusty seemed caught up in his impersonation game because he next assumed a relaxed stance and gave Jonathan a long once-over that felt overly familiar. "And then he said, 'Nah, go ahead, my man.'"

Jonathan grinned and waited. Rusty leaned close, without losing eye contact. "My man, get it?" He snickered. "And then, you two smooched a lot." Rusty puckered his lips and made kissing sounds.

Jonathan rolled his eyes. "Did you play with dolls a lot while you were a kid?"

Rusty made a surprised face. "How do you know that? Are you a wizard?"

That was his cue to smack Rusty playfully upside the head. Just like that, his mischievous companion pulled away, laughing.

Jonathan followed him. "You know, Rusty, I didn't ask you. What are you grateful for today? It used to be a valued tradition in my family," he added, "to tell one another what we are thankful for."

Rusty turned to face him and walked backwards. "Friends, mostly. Including new ones." He smiled warmly at him.

Jonathan offered the same smile in return.

"And that turkey, 'cause it was awesome. So, I guess I'm thankful you can cook. What about you?"

"Mainly, for getting to know and like so many wonderful people here at Sunny Hill," Jonathan said promptly. "Also, hearing you sing. Would you sing again? I'd like to listen in, if that's all right with you."

"Sure, why not?" Rusty slapped him on the shoulder. "But I'll have to blindfold you." He said the last words in a subdued voice.

"We're not getting kinky for your sake," Jonathan warned. "And stop trying to scandalize me because it won't work."

“I’m not doing that,” Rusty replied. “It’s been a long time since anyone watched me while listening to my singing, is all.”

Jonathan was starting to figure out when Rusty was telling the truth. His features softened, and his green eyes, always up to no good, became slightly distant as if they no longer were looking at what lay in front of them, but they turned inward in an effort to discover a new world.

Jonathan took Rusty’s hand and squeezed it briefly. “Blindfold me, then. I won’t mind.”

The green eyes turned toward him and smiled along with the rest of the boy’s face. “Cool. But don’t go nitpicking about what kind of blindfold I’m going to use.”

Jonathan decided that rolling his eyes just wouldn’t work. “All right. Use whatever you have. See what sacrifices I’m willing to make only so that I can hear you sing once more?”

Rusty clapped his hands together in unhidden glee. “Let’s go then. I know exactly what I’m going to sing to you.”

“Let’s hope it’s nothing embarrassing.”

“They don’t do BDSM opera if that’s what you’re worrying about, Hamilton.” Rusty could joke all he wanted, but judging from the way his eyes shone, Jonathan could tell he was over the moon with the prospect of having an audience, even if it was going to be just one person.

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Regrets weren’t the kind of thing Maddox was used to experiencing, especially when it came to important things. Now, as he sat around the table with all his siblings and parents, just sensing the slight tension in the air made him feel guilty. The last thing he had expected when he was leaving Sunny Hill to come home had been to ruin Thanksgiving for everyone. Now, his sisters were talking a bit too loudly, his dad was praising his mom’s cooking a bit too much, and furtive glances were being cast in his direction, as if to check on him and see if he was the same.

He was the same. He was pretty sure of that. Only now, after he had admitted to loving another guy and, to his surprise, his family had reacted in a way that he had never expected, things felt different than they had before. After thinking things through the previous night while struggling to fall asleep, he began to understand their reaction a little bit, although a part of him still wanted them to see him for who he was, their son that they had known all their lives.

It wasn’t like him to spend a lot of time in introspection, either. That was a new feeling, as well, and as uncomfortable as a new jacket that didn’t quite fit. He had blurted out to his family that he loved Jonathan, and why had that thought never occurred to him before? Maybe, in a way, it had, because lately he had been with Jonathan more than he had been with anyone else in his life. Kane teased him constantly that he was taken now, Dex was always smirking and trading meaningful glances with his pal whenever he thought Maddox wasn’t looking, and Rusty...

Well, Rusty had taken to his relationship with Jonathan like it was the most natural thing in the world, and there had never been a time when Maddox had been competing with him for the attentions of the female population on campus.

It was late in the evening when he got the chance to sit and talk to his parents again. All his life, he had known that they loved him. They had always given him the longest leash, too, always letting him get away with things his siblings weren't allowed to even think about, so being their favorite had been something that maybe, just maybe, he had taken for granted.

He sat at the table across from them like he was about to face a firing squad. "I'm sorry I ruined Thanksgiving," he blurted out and stared at his linked hands. He could argue about loving Jonathan to the moon and back, and they really needed to meet him to understand why he was insisting on this so much, which meant that, right now, words would not be enough.

"You didn't ruin anything, Maddox," his mom said in a weary voice. "You took us by surprise, that's all."

Maddox looked up. "So, you're fine with it?" he asked slowly.

His parents exchanged a short, eloquent look. "We talked, and we realized that you're very young, and that means that you're entitled to make your own mistakes."

Maddox clenched his jaw so hard that a sharp pain shot through it. Were they really calling Jonathan a mistake now? What the hell were they thinking? He wasn't supposed to be mad at them, he had even promised that to himself, but right now, nothing felt like it should.

"We believe that you'll come to realize that in your own time," his dad added, seeing how he wasn't saying anything. "If we contradict you, you'll only think you're right, and we're wrong. Don't forget that we're your parents, Maddox. That means that we've known you for longer than you've known yourself, and it will always be like that."

He hadn't been expecting a heart to heart talk from them, and definitely not one that was supposed to put him in his place like this one seemed to be intended to do. "Maybe I'm someone else now," he said quietly. He averted his face for a moment. He wasn't the kind of person to fall prey to his emotions like that, either.

"That's what you think," his mom contradicted him, and his dad stopped her by putting an appeasing hand on her shoulder. Maddox could tell she was keeping herself from saying more, and with a lot of effort. As volcanic as his mom's temperament was, she always said she was sorry later, when things cooled down a bit. But she had had the entire night to think things through, and it looked like she had made up her mind.

Maddox leaned back in his chair, half-defeated. Then, he revolted, mostly on the inside, since the still rational part of his brain told him that he needed to navigate this with careful consideration

and a bit of diplomacy. “Then I suppose I need to prove to you that Jonathan and I are good for each other. It’s my longest relationship so far, and I don’t see an end to it now, not sometime in the future, and not ever.”

The strength with which he said those words seemed to have taken his parents aback a bit, because, for a few moments, they looked at him like he was someone new, and maybe a grownup, too.

His mom pursed her lips, so his dad took over. “All right, Maddox. We’re old enough to admit that we might also be wrong sometimes. That is a piece of advice we want to give to you, as well. When that moment comes, when you realize that you’ve been wrong, come to us and admit it. We promise that we won’t judge you for making a mistake, and we will respect you for having the strength to tell us about it, as well.”

“I won’t have anything to admit,” Maddox said, feeling some of his natural confidence coming back.

The suddenly peppy tone of his voice triggered a half-smile from his dad. “If that’s the case,” he replied, “one day, we’d like to meet Jonathan.”

“We would?” His mom looked up at his dad.

“Yes,” his dad replied firmly.

That was everything he needed to hear.

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*How’s it hanging, Sunny Hill? Hopefully, that turkey and pie have already settled because we’re about to drop the bomb, with a capital B, literally, of the year, and maybe the biggest in the entire history of yours truly, Xpress. We have drama, mystery, romance... and what else? Oh, maybe a few drops of betrayal? Just for flavor.*

*So...*

*Pumped up for the news drop? Check with us on Monday. Remember; you always hear it here first. Tootles!*

### *Chapter Thirty-Six – What’s That Word... Context?*

“Are you worried about something?” Jonathan felt the need to ask, while taking in Maddox’s slightly drawn face. His pretty features were tinged with a new kind of sadness and made him look more mature, but that didn’t mean Jonathan enjoyed seeing his boyfriend suffer. Yes, he was thinking of Maddox as pretty, despite what he had told Rusty about guys not liking to be called that. As long as he was thinking it, not saying it out loud, there would be no incredulous glares directed at him, so it was fine.

It was Sunday evening, and everyone was back from their short Thanksgiving break. Jonathan had been waiting for Maddox, eager to see him again, and maybe to gather the courage to tell him the same words Rusty had wrenched out of him. Timing was everything, and right now, seeing Maddox troubled like that, it didn’t feel like a good time at all.

Maddox lay on his belly on the bed and he was munching on his bottom lip. They had kissed briefly, and Jonathan had felt butterflies in his stomach as he anticipated how it would feel to be in Maddox’s room again, both sharing the same space, thinking of the same thing.

Only they weren’t thinking of the same thing, and Jonathan withdrew into himself, not wanting to behave like a horny teenager with disregard for the other’s internal suffering. He placed a sympathetic hand on Maddox’s shoulder and began massaging it. “Is it about your parents?” He lay on one side, so he had an unhindered view of Maddox’s frown and the drooping corners of his mouth.

“Well, they didn’t take it well at all, as I told you,” Maddox eventually replied.

“Maybe it was too soon?” Jonathan offered.

Maddox gave him a glare. “Too soon?”

He was somehow saying the wrong things. “I don’t know. We’ve only been seeing each other for a few months.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Apparently, any word he said was just a shovelful of dirt out of the huge hole he was digging for himself.

“Nothing,” he hurried to say.

The beautiful gray eyes narrowed at him. “Are you kidding me?” Maddox scoffed and looked away. “I thought we were serious.” The last words came out quietly.

“We are,” Jonathan said in a defensive tone and let his hand slip from Maddox’s shoulder. “It’s only that it might not look the same to the outside world, that’s all. I mean, it would be a

different thing if we had dated for a year or two. In their eyes, I mean.” Usually, he was considerably more articulate when it came to what went out of his mouth.

“Hmm.” Maddox rested his chin on top of his crossed forearms and let out a long sigh.

Jonathan began caressing his head, running his fingers through the dark hair. It didn’t take long for Maddox to start purring, which was definitely a lot better than awkward conversation.

“Are you going to introduce me to your parents?”

The question took Jonathan a bit by surprise. Maddox at his parents’ estate took some effort of imagination, for no other reason than his parents never invited anyone over who wasn’t of the same station. He could easily imagine the priceless look on their faces, and he didn’t want to expose Maddox to that sort of judgmental behavior. A sudden and strong feeling of possession and over-protectiveness washed over him.

His silence was misinterpreted. “Don’t tell me you didn’t even about think it,” Maddox said in a sharp tone and turned his head to give him a hard look.

Jonathan felt like shriveling on the inside under those hurt eyes. “Yes, of course, I did,” he said, and even to his own ears, he sounded unconvincing.

Maddox frowned and looked away. Jonathan didn’t know what to do to make it better. As long as they lived their relationship here, in the large cocoon that was the campus of Sunny Hill, everything went fine. The troubles began, apparently, when they tried to take it out into the real world. It hadn’t worked with Maddox’s parents, who, according to their son, were kind-hearted and open-minded.

“Look,” he said, “it’s not like we’re about to ask for their blessing. We’ll convince them all in due time. Until then, we have finals, and a lot of work to do.”

“Fine,” Maddox agreed, but he did so in an exasperated tone. “So, you don’t want to spend the night?”

Jonathan wanted to say that he would like to, but he sensed that he had blundered enough. “We should both get some rest,” he replied.

He leaned over and kissed Maddox’s cheek. He could tell his boyfriend was pissed, but something told him that even if he stayed, things wouldn’t have gotten better, either. Sometimes, people just needed a little bit of space.

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*The name of the game? Secret love affair. (Of course, nothing’s ever too secret when Xpress is on the job.)*

*The stars of the game? This is where things are getting juicy... and by that, we're telling you, guys and gals, you're gonna lick the cookie bowl clean, once you hear the names of those involved.*

*First, the sexy, the mysterious, the too-good-to-be-true... cue drums! Jonathan Hamilton! Yes, the accomplished new sensation of junior year, the one who made Maddox Kingsley reevaluate his sexuality from the ground up, is in the headline!*

*Second, our very own college idol, the veritable king of Sunny Hill, the guy famous for making the world tour (the world we live in, here, at our campus) in eighty beds or more... ta-da! Rusty Parker!*

*But what do these two have in common? You may ask. Aside from the fact that one's Maddox Kingsley's official boyfriend, and the other's the same guy's bestie for life, anyone would feel tempted to say 'not much'. Jonathan Hamilton dresses to impress when he goes out to buy popsicles. Rusty Parker just throws anything that happens to be in his way on his perfect muscular body ... yet he still manages to look perfect.*

*Where one has a perfect GPA score, the other barely makes it from one exam to the next.*

*Where one is clearly some one-percenter's offspring, the other comes from a broken home.*

*Where... you catch our drift, right?*

*Well, as the old adage goes, opposites attract! Thanksgiving break proved the perfect opportunity for these two opposites to meet...*

*Well, let's allow the pictures to do the talking for us! Stay tuned, this story is not going to die soon. And we're here, ready to provide you with new tasty tidbits as we wait for the drama to unfold.*

*Lastly, a few questions for our heroes:*

*Maddox Kingsley, have you decided to share your boyfriend with your bestie or...?*

*Jonathan Hamilton, are you a superhero? Flipping two one-hundred-percent straight guys in just half a year must be classified as a superpower. We're just saying!*

*Rusty Parker, are you going to disappoint all the girls on campus you haven't gotten to seduce yet? That would be a mistake...*

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Maddox didn't like how he had let things go with Jonathan the night before. Obviously, he had made the guy uncomfortable and caused him to feel judged. And he had looked forward so much to getting together again. That short kiss they had shared didn't count as much, and now he was

itching to find a way to persuade Jonathan to forget about studying for about one hour so that they could get together and stop talking about parents and whatnot for a change.

He pulled out his phone, determined to establish a short, hot date before getting to class.

*You've been tagged.*

“What now?” he groaned and swiped away the annoying notification. It had been fun for a while to be a local celebrity, but he had come to think there was something wrong with being too popular.

A few snickers a couple of feet away from him proved enough of a distraction for him to let his thumb hover over the screen without touching it. Maddox looked around; he was either suffering from a serious case of self-importance, or everyone seemed to be staring at him. “What?” he growled at a tall thin guy passing by him with a knowing smirk on his face. Something about the way that dude was grinning at him like he knew him from Adam or knew something Maddox didn't was extremely annoying.

He must have looked aggressive enough, because the guy lost his smirk and turned on his heel like he suddenly remembered he was going the wrong way.

However, a short chubby girl pulling her boyfriend by the hand, a dude equally short and chubby, stared at him without flinching. “Is it true, Maddox?” she asked with a fake grin.

Maddox considered the girl, wondering if he had ever hooked up with her, but nothing about her seemed familiar. “Is what supposed to be true?”

She leaned in and gave him a conspiratorial wink. “Are you in a threesome?”

Maddox groaned and rolled his eyes. “I've never been with two girls at the same time,” he said. “Don't believe everything Xpress says.”

“Not two girls,” the female student waved dismissively. “Two guys.”

“Not that kind of threesome either,” Maddox said with emphasis. So, the rumor mill was trying to get Jonathan and him into some weird sex-scenario.

The girl faked surprise so badly that he gave her a ‘are you kidding me?’ stare just for the sake of it.

“Then, in that case, should I say... I'm sorry for you?” the girl asked and patted her lips with her index finger.

“Why should you be sorry for me?” Maddox asked and put away his phone to cross his arms and give the girl a hard glare.

“Don’t tell me you don’t know even now,” she said and the stricken expression on her face was just too much. “I’m not going to be the one to tell you. Just check Xpress,” she added and put her hand up like she had had enough by pestering him out of the blue like that.

Curious looks continued to be thrown in his direction, suddenly giving him a somewhat eerie feeling. The girl walked away with her boyfriend without saying goodbye, and Maddox pulled out his phone again.

He tsked at the title and the text. Jeez, the things some people did to get some clout. However, the self-assurance that was a part of him began to slip away as he reached the pictures.

Jonathan was there. Rusty was there. And the time stamp said that the pic had been taken during Thanksgiving break. Whatever, things like that were easy to fake. And something told him that Xpress had the resources to fake whatever they wanted, especially for a fabricated story that was aimed to make trouble for him and his relationship. Ever since he had turned the page and started dating Jonathan, Xpress had expressed their concern with his lack of doing things popular kids on campus did, but really, this was too much.

But were the pictures fake, too? Nothing was impossible, not with today’s technology, or they could have been taken sometime before and only made to look like they were fresh out of the oven.

He frowned as he took in the way Rusty puckered his lips as if he was just about to kiss Jonathan. He shook his head. So, his boyfriend and his bestie had played some ball together; it wasn’t like they needed to ask for his permission, but he didn’t recall Rusty being even remotely close to Jonathan. They obviously had talked when Jonathan visited their house, just the same as had happened with Kane and Dex, but from that to being so familiar seemed like a huge leap. It didn’t matter. Rusty had a way of getting under anyone’s skin, and he was famous for not understanding personal space as a general rule.

However, he didn’t know Jonathan was capable of throwing one arm so casually over someone’s shoulders, unless that someone was him, Maddox. Xpress called Jonathan the Cold Beauty for the never too physical way in which he treated everyone. There was no one with as many boundaries as Jonathan.

There was a possibility that everything was completely ‘shopped. Yeah, that had to be it. Still, his eyes remained glued to the screen, especially at the green sweater Rusty wore. He couldn’t tell beyond the shadow of a doubt that it was the same sweater, but it looked exactly like one Jonathan had. And Rusty didn’t do sweaters, especially not one this nice.

Everything had to be fabricated, he decided and ignored the pitying looks, the smirks, and the snickers coming from all sides as he walked to class. He’d probably have a laugh later with

Jonathan and Rusty, and they would probably tell him how once they had played ball together and stuff like that, or that everything was fake.

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Jonathan rubbed his temples hard as he stared, unblinking, at the screen. How on earth was this possible? He had taken a place in the last row and now, he was reading Xpress, the phone placed on top of his open textbook, the professor's voice far away and of no interest to him. He should have known that it was a mistake to keep the fact that Rusty had been with him on Thanksgiving break from Maddox, but now, things were being blown totally out of proportion.

Xpress was making it seem like some big secret love affair, but in all honesty, nothing of what was shown in those pictures was remotely incriminating. At best, they looked like two pals having fun, right?

But how had they taken the pictures? Jonathan inspected them carefully. He had no idea what he was looking for or why that aspect of the situation was important. There was a possibility that they came from security camera footage, but he wasn't so sure. It appeared that the stills had been hand-picked so that it looked as if something was going on between Rusty and him, something that made them look very, very bad.

Maddox had been conspicuously silent all morning, and Jonathan feared what he might say. Surely, he wouldn't be very angry at him for keeping Rusty's presence at the campus a secret. The arguments were faint and insubstantial in his mind. Even if Maddox didn't think they were cheating on him or something as ludicrous as that, he had every right to be upset at being lied to.

He would have to make amends. There was no other way. In the meantime, he read and re-read the text, in search for clues, until something began insinuating itself in his mind with a tinge of familiarity.

Jonathan pursed his lips. He needed to shake someone up. And to begin ignoring all the looks thrown in his direction that had been making his skin tingle with unpleasant apprehension since the beginning of class.

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Connor wasn't hard to find, as his posse always made him stand out everywhere he went. Jonathan stopped a few feet from the group and said loudly, "Can I have a word with you?"

Connor stopped in mid-tirade, something about how the Earth was dying, and stared at him with quirked eyebrows. "Good day to you, too, Jonathan," he said pointedly.

"I'm not in the mood for pleasantries," Jonathan cut his words short. "I want to have a word with you."

Connor dropped his hands and stuffed his pockets with them. He gave an apologetic shrug, aimed at his posse, and started walking toward Jonathan. “I would have thought you’d be more concerned with damage control, given the breaking news you’re currently the star of.”

Jonathan walked away from the main thoroughfare and waited for Connor to follow. Once they were at a decent distance from the guy’s friends who were staring at them in complete disregard of any semblance of respect for privacy, he stopped. “Don’t you think you’ve gone too far, Connor? I really don’t understand you,” he started.

“What, exactly, are you talking about?” Connor gave him such an innocent look that Jonathan almost bought his act.

“I know it’s you. I don’t care about exposing you, or anything remotely similar, but I do have a problem if you continue attacking my relationship with Maddox in this craven manner.” Without realizing it, he had raised his voice and barely reined in his impulse to take Connor by the front of his shirt and shake him out of his stupidity.

Connor narrowed his eyes and made a confused face. “Jonathan, be a little more specific. By the way, I’m over you, so if this is your way of showing me that you feel neglected since I’m paying you no more attention--”

Jonathan took out his phone and pointed at the phrase that had awakened a particular memory in his mind. “Aren’t these your words?”

Connor squinted as he looked at the phone, then at Jonathan. He began laughing. “Seriously, Jonathan? Do you think I’m Xpress?”

“Yes, seriously,” Jonathan said through his teeth. “You said the same thing to me not so long ago.”

To his annoyance, Connor just shrugged. “I’m flattered that you believe me to be as clever as to run an enterprise like Xpress, but you’re wrong. And come on, saying that someone has a superpower if he’s good at something is basically a cliché. Or maybe, someone from Xpress heard our conversation. Have you thought of that?”

Jonathan was boiling on the inside. No, he hadn’t thought of that, and it took great effort to stop his anger from taking over. He could be wrong, yes, but he could also be right, and Connor seemed to be a good candidate for running a sleazy thing like Xpress. “Deny all you want. It doesn’t do you any honor that you’re using your little publication to smear my reputation.”

Connor laughed again, grinding his gears. “It’s college, Jonathan,” he said in a sugary voice. “You’re popular, whether you like it or not. By the way, did you truly flip Rusty Parker, as well?” He clicked his tongue. “Then I wasn’t wrong when I told you that you have an awesome

superpower. And Xpress just happens to agree with me, which makes me feel very flattered, of course.”

Jonathan didn't hide his disgust when he looked at Connor. “Aren't you a warrior for the good of the Earth? How does that fit with your admiration for a thing,” he spat the word, “that does nothing else but bring people down?”

Connor shrugged. “I hate liars,” he said airily. “Xpress simply exposes them, shows their true colors. I'd say it's a worthy cause.”

Jonathan adjusted the strap of the bag on his shoulder. He had had some time to cool down a bit. It wasn't like it was a logical thing to expect Connor to simply admit that he was behind that piece. “You're wrong,” he said thinly. “But I suppose that says something about you, something I should have seen from the start.”

Connor's façade appeared shaken for the first time since the beginning of their conversation. “What's that something supposed to be?”

“You're a fraud,” Jonathan said and stared Connor down. “It doesn't matter what lies you tell yourself each morning when you get up. That's what you are.”

And, also for the first time since they had started talking, Connor didn't have a comeback. He stood there, staring after Jonathan as he walked away.

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“Can you believe the shit they just pulled on Xpress?” Maddox started as soon as he was inside. He threw his bag on the sofa and then plopped down by Kane's side.

“What shit?” Kane asked while he continued to examine the textbooks open and spread out on the coffee table. “Ah, you mean the shit about Jonathan and Rusty?”

“Yeah,” Maddox said with a scowl. He pushed his feet against the low table, making it teeter.

Kane grabbed it and looked at him. “Don't tell me you're falling for that bullshit. They probably fabricated the photos.”

“Yeah, totally,” Maddox said. “Do you know I told my parents about Jonathan and me?”

“No, you didn't tell me.” Kane gave up on perusing his study materials. “How did it go?”

“Well, not that good,” Maddox mumbled and stared down stubbornly.

“Like how?”

“Like they don't believe I'm serious about Jonathan,” Maddox replied.

“You’ll show them, then. In due time.”

Exactly the same words Jonathan had used the evening before. Somehow, they weren’t enough for him. “I really don’t get it. Don’t they want me to be happy? I’ve always thought that they did.”

Kane appeared to consider his words carefully. “It’s not the easiest thing in the world for parents to accept. My future sister-in-law didn’t have it easy, either, when she came out to hers.”

“Future sister-in-law... look at him talking,” Maddox said with a broad smile and punched Kane in the shoulder playfully. “So, you think I should just give them enough time to adjust to the idea.”

“That, too. And it would also help, you know, to reinforce the thing whenever possible. Maybe give them a chance to get to know Jonathan. It is one thing for them to hear that you like a dude, and another to meet the guy. And as much a stick-in-the-mud as your Jonathan is, he’s the type that parents like, usually.”

“He’s not like that,” Maddox protested with a scowl. Kane gave him a look. “Well, maybe a little.” Jonathan was surely a bit too rigid and formal when it came to social interactions, which was why the thing with Rusty in Xpress didn’t make one bit of sense. Kane was right to think the photos were fake. If it had been Ray in there instead of Rusty, he would have understood it, because Jonathan’s roommate had somehow managed to break through those defenses, but that still didn’t mean that Jonathan would start hanging out and touching other people out of the blue. “By the way, where’s Rusty?”

“He might be sleeping,” Kane offered.

“Did he go to classes today?”

“To some, I think.”

Maddox shrugged. “All right, I’ll go upstairs. In case Jonathan comes, just send him up.”

“Okay,” Kane agreed and returned to his textbooks.

Maddox felt restless while he climbed the stairs. He needed more confirmation that the whole thing in Xpress was made up. Kane’s chill explanation and attitude were not enough. And he wanted to talk to Rusty about how Thanksgiving with his dad had gone. They hadn’t had time to chat the day before, and it was overdue. If he knew Rusty well enough, he had some things to say, even if they had to be wrenched out of him, as was the case with all hurtful things.

He knocked on Rusty’s door before reaching his.

“Yeah,” came from the other side.

Good. At least, he wasn't sleeping, and he hadn't even partied or hooked up the night before, which was a miracle in itself.

"Hi, man," Rusty greeted him. He wasn't sleepy, his hair was somewhat brushed, and even his room looked a little better than usual. So, after all, Thanksgiving break had been a good thing for Rusty, and Maddox was glad.

He was even at his desk, writing something. Maddox wouldn't go as far as to consider it studying, but it was still better than nothing.

"Hey," Maddox replied. "We didn't get a chance to talk last night. How was your break?" As he talked, he looked around, wondering once again at the decent degree of neatness of the room. His eyes fell on the bed that had been made, unlike Rusty's MO, as its owner said, always ready for some action.

"You know," Rusty replied, suspiciously tight-lipped.

Maddox was about to begin teasing the truth out of him when his eyes fell on something peeking from under the pillow. He went over without thinking. It was something green and looked like part of a...

He pulled at it, disturbing the pillow. "The fuck is this, Rusty?" he asked, holding up the offending object and feeling the floor shake under his feet.

Rusty turned toward him and his eyes grew wide. "Um, it's a sweater," he said slowly, while his eyes began to dart sideways, in search of escape.

"Jonathan's sweater!" Maddox threw the thing back on the bed. He saw red. The only thing he knew right now was that he had been lied to by two of the most important people in his life.

Rusty jumped and put himself in the doorway, blocking the exit. "Maddox, I can explain."

"Get the fuck out of my way," Maddox growled.

"Jonathan is not to blame," Rusty continued. "I told him to keep it a secret from you."

"Oh, and that makes it okay?" Maddox tried to wrench Rusty away from the door. "For you to steal my boyfriend?"

Rusty stared at him, his jaw slack. Like he would fall for that act. He had known Rusty to have been the perfect actor so many times before that he no longer kept count.

"Are you nutso?" Rusty bellowed at him while pointing a finger at his temple. "I didn't steal Jonathan."

"It looks like everyone thinks so," Maddox said pointedly.

“Maddox, chill. Xpress is just throwing shit at walls, waiting to see if it sticks.”

“Well, it looks like it did. Or are you going to tell me that those photos were ‘shopped?’”

Rusty made a sour face. “At least I would have said they were deep fakes.”

“But they’re not, right? They’re real,” Maddox said. He could feel steam blowing out of his ears.

“Or are you going to lie to me even now?”

Rusty looked guiltily away.

“As I thought,” Maddox concluded. “You just couldn’t stand to see me happy with him.” His words were vindictive but he couldn’t stop them if it cost him half an arm.

“What?” Rusty now looked stricken. “Why would you say that? I’ve never touched him, not the way you think.”

“No shit. How about the time when you grabbed his ass?”

Rusty worried his bottom lip and stared at him like he could drop the act and start to cry at any moment. That had to be bullshit, too. Maddox wanted to think Rusty wouldn’t go that low. He had seen his best friend cry once, and it had been serious. If he did it to cover a lie, Maddox didn’t want to think what he would start believing about Rusty.

“I thought you forgave me for that,” Rusty said softly. “And I didn’t exactly grab--”

“I don’t care,” Maddox said aggressively. “You’re not my friend anymore.”

A stunned Rusty was easy to overcome and forced to move out of the door. “Wait, Maddox, you didn’t let me explain,” he called after him.

Maddox jumped down the stairs two at a time, fast. Like he cared for explanations given by a liar.

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“Are you cheating on me with Rusty?”

Jonathan had expected a lot of things from Ray, but not that when he set foot into their shared space. “Really, Ray,” he said with a long sigh. “I’ve had enough of a stupid day.”

“You two look like he’s your new bestie,” Ray said pointedly. He even stabbed the screen on his phone in emphasis.

“At least you don’t believe Rusty is my secret love affair like at least half the campus,” Jonathan added.

“Who cares about that?” Ray asked but then he smiled. “I got you scared that I was bestie-jealous, right?”

Jonathan rolled his eyes. “Yeah, totally, as kids would say today.”

“Ugh, not even for a moment? I’ll fail as an actor then.”

“Was that ever a valid career choice for you, Ray?”

Ray shrugged. “One needs to have a backup plan.”

“Maybe you should consider another backup plan.” Jonathan sank into the kitchen chair and ran one hand over his face.

“Hey, are you okay, JJ?” Ray squeezed his shoulder in sympathy. “Should I make some tea?”

“No,” Jonathan said quickly, “I’m fine. It’s just this stupid story. Do you have any idea how long it will take to die down?”

“I’m sorry, but I have no idea. Just between you and me, the photos are fake, right?”

Jonathan shook his head. There was no point in lying. “No. I didn’t go to my parents, after all. And I happened upon Rusty here.” He didn’t say a word about Rusty’s singing. At least, that was a secret he could keep without hurting anyone.

“Wow. So I do have reason to be jealous,” Ray concluded.

Jonathan hoped that his glare was enough to stop Ray mid-performance. “I could use a friend who’s not jealous right now.”

Ray hugged him suddenly, making an attempt to squeeze the life out of him. His efforts in that direction were laughable, but Jonathan appreciated them nonetheless. “You can count on me, JJ. I’m totally your bestie. And just ignore stupid Xpress. As long as the people who know you don’t give a damn about their gossip, nothing else matters, right? By the way, what is Maddox saying? I bet he laughed his ass off.”

The words had barely left Ray’s mouth when they started at a loud knock on the door.

“I’ll get it,” Ray offered. Jonathan hiked his bag up on his shoulder and headed for his room.

He stopped dead in his tracks when he heard a familiar voice greeting Ray and asking about him. As absorbed as he had been with proving that Connor was behind all that drama in Xpress, he had neglected to call Maddox to tell him the true version of things.

Ray stepped out of the way to allow Maddox inside, and Jonathan turned.

“What the hell, Jonathan?” Maddox began without any preamble.

There was murder written all over his pretty face, which immediately gave Jonathan pause.

“You’re not even denying it, are you?” Maddox threw his arms in the air.

Ray tiptoed around them carefully and headed for his room. Jonathan threw him a short grateful look for his delicate approach.

“Is this about Xpress?” Jonathan asked as soon as Ray closed the door behind him quietly. “Look, Maddox, it’s all blown out of proportion. First of all, I owe you an apology.”

“For cheating on me?”

“Cheating on you?” Jonathan felt his face hurting and his chest imploding inwards. This wasn’t Ray making a joke; no, it was Maddox, with fire in his eyes, angry like he had never seen him before. “That is so preposterous that I cannot even--”

Maddox moved closer until only one hairsbreadth separated them. “Look into my eyes and tell me you didn’t lie to me.”

Jonathan worked his jaw. “I should have told you Rusty was with me. He didn’t want you to know because--”

“Because what? Because he wanted to give it to you behind my back?”

Jonathan closed his eyes for a moment. If he were an insulted woman, he would have slapped Maddox right then. But he wasn’t, and he was also to blame. “I’m in the wrong, Maddox, and I admit it. But I’m not in that kind of wrong. So, please, let’s just calm down--”

“I don’t want to calm down,” Maddox interrupted him again. No, that was obviously the wrong thing to say to someone breathing fire like that. “To think that I ruined my folks’ Thanksgiving because of you.”

Jonathan turned rigid, the words of apology freezing on his lips. “You shouldn’t have done that,” he said, letting the words fall like pebbles down a mountain.

Maddox’s eyes flashed with hurt. “Yeah,” he said, “yeah. It should have fucking occurred to me that this is as one-sided as hell. ‘Cause I wanted to take you to meet my parents, while you were just bullshitting me with promises of showing me your frigging horses.”

Jonathan paled under the accusation. “That’s not true, Maddox.”

Maddox shook his head impatiently. “I’m so mad right now at you and Rusty. How could you keep it a secret from me that he was here, with you? Unless it was something worth keeping secret, right?”

“You’re twisting everything, and you don’t want to hear the truth,” Jonathan countered. “And as much as I regret not telling you about him when I had the chance, I also understand why he doesn’t want to be pitied and looked down upon.”

“Are you an expert in how Rusty feels now? He’s my best friend,” Maddox said through his teeth and pointed at his chest.

“I’m not saying that I am...”

“No, you’re not.” Maddox tsked and began to walk back toward the door. “I was so fucking stupid.”

“Maddox,” Jonathan called out and rushed after him. This couldn’t be it. All because of that gossip rag and their uncanny ability to twist everything? He caught Maddox by the arm. “Nothing happened between Rusty and I. How can you even believe such a thing?”

Maddox’s eyes were a storm of emotions as they stared at him. “He even cleaned up his room,” he said. “Rusty never does that. But he did it for you. So don’t tell me nothing happened between you two.”

Jonathan opened his mouth to protest and say that he hadn’t even set foot in Rusty’s room, but Maddox continued, “And you even gave him that sweater. When did you ever do that for me? When did you give me anything?”

“I didn’t know--”

“Forget it. It’s all my fault. I hope you’ll be happy together or whatever.”

Then Maddox was out in the corridor, and a few curious heads peeked out from slightly opened doors. Jonathan stopped; his good upbringing prevented him from causing a scene. He stepped back into his dorm room and closed the door.

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Maddox was still trembling with rage when he returned home. Dex and Kane promptly barred his way as he tried to head up the stairs and hide in his room. Wasn’t that what people did when they wanted to lick their wounds out of sight? Supposedly yes, but not when their roommates stood there, like the last defense against barbaric nomads.

“So,” Dex started and exchanged a short look with Kane, “is this the famous Kingsley temper in action or am I imagining things?”

Maddox growled. “You two, I’m not in the mood for your preaching. Get out of the way and let me be.”

“You fought with Rusty,” Kane said, “and I suppose you just came back from fighting with Jonathan, as well. By the way, how did it go?”

“None of your business.” He tried to push and squeeze between his two friends, but Dex pushed him back effortlessly. “Cut it out already!”

“Show us on this diagram,” Kane gestured as if he was painting with his fingers in the air, “where Xpress touched you.”

“Screw you, Kane!”

“Shit, Dex, it looks like it’s serious,” Kane declared.

“Of course, it’s serious,” Maddox exploded. “I told my parents--” He swallowed his words quick enough.

“You told your parents that Jonathan is an awesome guy and they should meet him,” Kane said and nodded as if he understood everything.

He understood absolutely nothing. “He’s not an awesome guy, ‘cause he’s a cheater.”

Dex growled to get his attention. “Maddox freaking Kingsley, have you lost all your brain cells since this morning? Anyone in their right mind looking at those pics would think that they’re looking at two dudes hanging out and nothing else. If they got just one pic of any of the thousands of situations in which Rusty tried to show me the weird tricks he uses to get chicks, we’d become the latest homoerotic sensation, and well beyond Sunny Hill. You know he’s a touchy-feely dude.”

“Yeah, he is, but Jonathan is not.”

Dex was looking at him as if he was sprouting another head. “Kane, this is serious, my man,” he addressed his bestie.

“Just let me be already,” Maddox insisted.

“Not unless you admit that you’re missing something important while you’re letting your stupid anger take over, keeping you staring at those pics in Xpress.”

“And what exactly am I missing?” Maddox growled.

“What’s that word, Kane?” Dex turned toward Kane again.

“Context?”

“Yeah,” Dex agreed and then annoyed the hell out of Maddox by knocking on his head with two bent fingers. “Get that through your thick skull first before you ruin something else, okay?”

Like he would take advice from his friends right now. They understood nothing about how the thought of seeing Jonathan with another man burned inside his chest.

### ***Chapter Thirty-Seven - Clean Up Your Act, Rusty Parker!***

*Hey, hey, Sunny Hill, are you ready for another episode of the biggest drama on campus? Just put your textbooks down for a moment, because we have news for you! No, it's not starting to rain men on the streets of our beloved campus, but it sure does rain hurt feelings and whatnot.*

*Did any of you ever think you would see Jonathan Hamilton's cool facade break? The perfect gentleman act appears to have been long forgotten... Oh, Jonathan... Desperation is so not a good look on you... And it surely doesn't go with any of your four-hundred-dollar sweaters!*

*We now have confirmation that Jonathan and our king Rusty Parker really played the horizontal cha-cha behind Maddox Kingsley's back. As you all know by now, Maddox dropped his so-called boyfriend like a hot potato the moment he learned - from us, of course - that he had been taken for a fool by Cold Beauty himself...*

*...and also by his best friend for life. But maybe we should scratch that last bit from that title, there is no 'for life' anymore, and we doubt that Maddox and Rusty are even simple friends at the moment. We get it, Maddox, we get it. Rusty should have stuck to that old maxim. Bros before hoes, right?*

*In the wake of all this drama happening right here, at the heart of Sunny Hill, you would expect things to die down by now, to see Jonathan Hamilton walking hand in hand with Rusty Parker, and for Maddox to return to the loving arms of his female adorers.*

*But no, these boys just won't let us put our pens down! (figuratively speaking, of course). Rusty seems to have lost all interest in Jonathan, as he does with all his conquests. Did you think you could keep the notorious sex beast all to yourself, Jonathan? It appears you're not that special, no matter what Maddox may have told you. You should have stuck with the guy who appreciated you.*

Desperation was, without a doubt, too strong a word, Jonathan wanted to believe. To the outside world, at least, his only attempts to try to get Maddox to talk to him had been a few chance encounters around campus. The magnifying glass under which they were being put, however, intensified everything else, especially perspective, hence the new piece in Xpress.

From the last row, he examined the back of Maddox's head, while the same bad feelings kept roiling in his gut. At least, one of them wasn't in the plethora of sentiments assaulting him at the moment, and that was regret for having ever gotten together with Maddox in the first place. He had expected that one to hit him first, but there was nothing like that. This time, he couldn't blame it all on someone else, and, in a strange way, that made him feel like he had some semblance of control over the situation. Yes, Maddox's words still hurt each time he remembered them and, yes, Maddox was unfair to think of him as a cheater, but despite all that, Jonathan understood on a deep level why his former boyfriend had reacted the way he had. If

given the chance, Jonathan would apologize until he was red in the face, but Maddox's cold stare had been enough to make the words die on his lips. That and, of course, Maddox had walked away every time, leaving him standing there like an idiot, talking to the empty air.

In the midst of all that, there was also someone else hurting, and Jonathan couldn't risk reaching out to him. The rumor mill had enough fodder as it was, and if it wanted someone to churn so badly, let it be him. Rusty had steered clear of him, as well, probably because he didn't want to feed Xpress any more stupid reasons to assume that there was something going on between them.

Ray had found the problematic sweater almost perfectly folded and packaged in a paper bag outside their dorm room with a single note. *Too nice for me.* Jonathan hadn't said a word, and Ray hadn't asked, and the sweater had ended up, paper bag and note, at the back of a drawer. If things ever got back to normal, Jonathan planned on convincing Rusty that he should still take the sweater.

Each one of them tried to deal with the aftermath in his own way. Maddox by ignoring him, and probably Rusty as well, he, Jonathan, by trying to get Maddox to listen, and Rusty... well, he didn't know what Rusty was doing, but it was a good bet that feeling miserable was high on the list. During Thanksgiving break, he had caught a glimpse of Rusty that wasn't anything like the persona everyone else thought they knew, and that glimpse told Jonathan that the chances were that Maddox's best friend was suffering just as much as he was, if not more.

The professor called them at the end of the class and praised them on an excellent project. Maddox stood a good foot away from him and didn't spare him a glance. Jonathan felt the now familiar ache all over and accepted the praises in a mechanical, barely polite way. When Maddox moved away, his feet forced him to follow, but only for a couple of steps. Through sheer willpower, he stopped himself. Let Xpress figure out what else they could invent about a story they obviously hoped to keep going for months if he no longer acted desperately in public.

On the inside, desperation was the name of the game, indeed. In the dim past, he had thought himself in love with Drew, but those pale feelings were nothing compared to the scorching heat that threatened to engulf him whole each time he thought of Maddox and what they had used to have.

It was in the light of those feelings that he couldn't bring himself to hate Maddox for ignoring him, not even a little. After all, it was a measure of how serious Maddox had been about their relationship. If Maddox hadn't cared at all about being lied to...

There was no point in dwelling on what-ifs, not with finals knocking at the door. Jonathan waited for a couple more minutes until he was certain Maddox was long gone, and he wouldn't risk bumping into him.

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One week later and it still hurt exactly the same way. There was not one sign that the pain in his chest would fade. Maddox was already getting used to tossing and turning all night long. It didn't help that the world at Sunny Hill was so small compared to the one outside. That meant that stumbling upon Jonathan was inevitable, and just seeing him opened the same can of worms over and over.

He couldn't stand the fact that Jonathan appeared so hurt when he looked at him. What right did he have to feel anything like that? Maddox closed his fists and cleared his head. Was love supposed to hurt like this? Damn, it sounded like a cheesy song. And he had finals to worry about, anyway, not how attractive Jonathan's face looked, even all filled with shadows like that. All it took was for him to close his eyes and remember the same face, inches from his, their heads lying on the same pillow.

Dex and Kane barely paid him any attention when he came inside. They had tried to get him to change his mind and 'see reason' – their words, not his – for days, but eventually, they had started to give him a wide berth since they needed to study like everyone else. He still felt their questioning eyes on him, and the atmosphere in the house was getting tense. He hadn't planned on breaking up with his friends, too, but if they couldn't be on his side, then so be it.

There was, of course, another particular problem that didn't want to go away, or better said, a particular someone. Maddox pursed his lips when he saw Rusty sitting on the floor by his bedroom door, looking like a kicked dog. If anything, the guy was resilient. Dex had mumbled something about having to drag Rusty from there and into his bed on more than one occasion. Clearly, everyone was getting a bit fed up with all the drama.

Xpress wouldn't let things cool down, either. Maddox assumed that, in due time, the gossip rag would find something else to chew and spit, but so far, no luck. It wasn't because it hurt his pride; in the past, if someone had asked him how he would feel under such circumstances, he would have said something along the lines of 'mad as hell' on the basis of wounded pride, but that wasn't it.

He just wanted them to stop already, and especially to quit picking on Jonathan. The guy was again being ostracized by most people, not that he was the type to care, but it felt unfair. Maddox didn't need to ingratiate himself to most people, either, these days, so that made two pariahs out of them, not just one. His own condition was by choice; Jonathan's wasn't.

Throughout all of this he had expected to start regretting ever having gotten involved with someone like that. It had been for the first time in his life, even. Yet, those feelings of regret never came. No, the most torturous part of it all was that he remembered all the good things so clearly. They hadn't been together long enough, probably, so that they had bad things to remember. And that made it all the more unbearable. There was nothing to focus on; not even little pet peeves, like if either of them had the nasty habit of picking his nose, or leaving dirty

socks everywhere, or loudly snoring, or anything. They had had only the perfect part of a relationship, or so it seemed. And that was the part that warranted all the regrets.

“You should just stop,” he told Rusty, the first words he had addressed to him in many days.

Rusty raised his head. “I’ll stop if you listen.”

He looked like warmed over shit, so something inside Maddox moved a little. “All right.”

“Really?” Rusty’s eyes lit up like a Christmas tree.

“Don’t make me change my mind. Get inside, say what you need to say, and get over it.”

Rusty didn’t say another word and followed him inside. Maddox sat at his desk, but left Rusty standing. His friend – oh, no, his former friend – began pacing the floor.

“Are you going to wear a new pattern in my carpet or are you going to start talking?”

“Right.” Rusty stopped abruptly and turned to face Maddox.

By now, he should have been used to Rusty’s antics, but the complicated look the green eyes threw at him was enough to make him feel uncomfortable. “What?” he asked, letting it come out more aggressively than he intended.

“I didn’t go to my dad’s for Thanksgiving,” Rusty began.

Maddox sighed. “Figures. It’s a bit too late to tell me that, don’t you think?”

Rusty grinned, and Maddox caught himself as he was about to do the same. It was too easy to like Rusty. It was almost unfair.

“So why didn’t you go?” he asked, deciding that since Rusty was there, it was better to get everything clear once and for all.

“Because he’s a douche, his new family sucks, and his new wife makes the shittiest pie ever,” Rusty replied promptly.

Seven years later and Rusty still called his dad’s current family the new one. Maddox felt slightly ill. To think that he had always taken his family for granted and even fought with them the last time they were together. He skimmed over the reason; he wouldn’t go there, not right now.

“So? Was it that hard to tell me? I was supposed to be your best friend,” Maddox pointed out. This was, by far, the most serious conversation he had ever had with Rusty, or maybe with anyone else their age.

“No.” Rusty shook his head. “But you have this awesome family, and I didn’t want you to pity me.”

Jonathan had told him as much. Maddox looked away, feeling a bit guilty. Annoyed at his own reaction, he tried to muster something of the anger he had felt all week. The problem with it was that it was growing thinner and thinner.

“All right,” he mumbled. “That still didn’t give you the right to…” He couldn’t bring himself to make the same accusations again. Kane had told him that he was starting to look ridiculous. Maddox knew his friend was right, but he wasn’t at all ready to let go of his righteous anger. He had been lied to, for fuck’s sake.

“Thing is,” Rusty continued, “Jonathan found something out about me, something secret. By mistake.”

“That you actually like him?” Maddox asked, working his jaw. “By the way, I told him I have nothing against you two being together if that’s what you both want.”

Rusty rubbed his head, making his hair an even bigger rat’s nest than it was before, if such a thing was possible. Then he groaned in frustration. “It was nothing like that.”

“What was it, then?” Maddox crossed his arms. He had a feeling that crossing his arms would make him look even more like he had the upper hand in this. And the right to be angry, of course. “You’re Rusty Parker. You don’t have secrets. You flaunt your kinks for the world to see. If there wasn’t the risk of getting arrested for indecent exposure, you’d drag your naked balls over each bench on campus. In the middle of the day.”

Rusty smirked. “Yeah, I’d totally do that.”

“So, the only secret I can think of is that you--”

“I can sing!” Rusty blurted out all of a sudden and then, much to Maddox’s surprise, he ran to the opposite corner of the room and started banging his head against the wall.

“Rusty, you can’t sing for shit. You can’t even handle karaoke. Stop making shit up,” Maddox said, rolling his eyes. It wasn’t right that it felt so normal to talk to Rusty. He had committed the unforgivable sin, even if Maddox’s confidence in that particular part of the story in Xpress was starting to shake more and more.

Rusty groaned and banged his head a few more times. Then, something happened.

Maddox stared at his friend’s back, as... the most astonishing sounds began to pour out of him. It was some kind of song, sure, not the kind he listened to as a college kid, or anyone else he knew, and it came out of Rusty?

He jumped from his chair and walked over to Rusty. He grabbed him and made him turn to face him. Next, he started searching Rusty for the hidden source of the music. Rusty just raised his arms and did a full turn while Maddox searched all his pockets for his phone. No, it really came out of Rusty's mouth, so Maddox took a couple of steps back, completely stunned. "What the fuck, dude? Did you swallow some opera singer?"

Rusty stopped and began laughing. "You said 'swallow'."

Maddox rolled his eyes and then punched him in the shoulder. "For real? I don't believe you. Do it again."

Rusty grinned from ear to ear and then raised one hand while he began another aria, something that sounded warm and wonderful, and made Maddox believe that he had never really listened to music the right way before.

"You're totally fucking with me," Maddox murmured and stared at his friend like he was seeing him for the first time in his life. "How don't I know about this?"

Rusty dropped his hand and stopped. "Because I kept it a secret. That's why."

"And Jonathan found out? How?"

"I was in the music room, thinking I had the entire place to myself. Jonathan just walked in. And he said 'bravo'," Rusty added with pride. "You know, the way they do at the opera house, while they applaud."

Maddox had no idea what people did when they went to watch operas live. But Jonathan would, of course. That was the world he came from, even though he never really said a lot about it. Too astonished by the recent revelations, he went back to his chair and sat down. He scratched his head. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Rusty sighed and sat on the floor, crossing his legs. "My dad always said singing like this was for fags."

Maddox almost bit his tongue at the offensive word.

Rusty caught his reaction right away. "Sorry. His words, not mine."

Maddox waved. "Don't worry about that. I'm starting to get more and more why you think the guy's a douche."

"Thing is, I stopped. I picked up sports and became good at it. I started chasing chicks, you know, the whole thing."

"For his sake?" Maddox asked.

“He still left,” Rusty replied. “And it was for my sake, too. I wouldn’t be who I am today if it wasn’t for all that, right?” There was something crooked in the way he smiled. Maddox wasn’t sure he completely agreed.

“You’re, like, awesome,” Maddox commented. “I mean, I know exactly nada about opera, but you sound like a freaking pro. At least like some winner on a talent show.”

The compliment seemed to hit Rusty in the right spot, because he kept smiling, and his features relaxed. “Before you say anything else, I made Jonathan promise to keep it a secret. And, um,” he added and ran his hands through his hair, trying to make it behave to no avail, “when you called, I took him by surprise and told him not to say that I was there. I didn’t give him much choice. He’s not to blame,” Rusty said and looked down guiltily.

Maddox sighed. “You both lied to me.”

“Yeah,” Rusty admitted, “but I’m the one you should be mad at.”

“I’m mad at you all right.”

“I know. I want to make it up to you. Any chores you want, I’ll do them.”

“Like what chores?”

“You know, making the bed, all that.”

Maddox threw a pensive look around his room. He wasn’t some neat freak, but there was little he could find to give Rusty to do, even if he wanted to. “Tell me more about your time with Jonathan,” he said while his eyes remained glued to the bookshelf. There was something that irked him a little, but he didn’t dwell on it as Rusty continued to talk.

“I forced him to cook my turkey,” Rusty said.

“Is that some weird kink?” Maddox made a face.

“No, I had a turkey and I put Jonathan in charge. He roasted it whole.” Rusty gestured with his arms. “And I ate most of it.”

“Did you eat a whole turkey?” Maddox didn’t exactly doubt it given the legendary capacity of Rusty’s stomach, but still.

“Over a few days. And I’m sure Jonathan hid some from me.”

Maddox sighed. Kane was right. Rusty and Jonathan had discovered that they were the only people on campus and just spent Thanksgiving together. It wasn’t a crime. But Maddox still wanted to hang on to the feeling of anger that had tortured him all week. And surely, Jonathan could cook, and Rusty could eat.

“He made me eat some veggies,” Rusty said with a disgusted face. “Although they were like the best veggies I’ve ever had.”

“Yeah. He’s good at that,” Maddox admitted. “Still, how the hell did you end up in his sweater? And why did you keep it?”

Rusty sighed. “I was in my crocs.”

“Your crocs?”

“The pink ones,” Rusty added.

Maddox rubbed his forehead. “Outside?”

“Yeah. Jonathan said I was a nutso--”

“He didn’t. Jonathan doesn’t talk like that,” Maddox corrected him.

“And then he gave me socks and a sweater. That sweater,” Rusty explained. “I should have given it back at the time. I knew it was too nice for me, but Jonathan insisted that I should keep it. I shouldn’t have kept it after.”

That was like Jonathan all right. Maddox felt a bit stupid and petty for all of his reproaches. “Don’t you still have it?”

“I left it by Jonathan’s dorm room door. I hope no one stole it,” Rusty said. “I mean, it’s like a legendary item right now.”

And that was like Rusty. Maddox felt more and more appeased. “Still,” he decided to throw his last card on the table, “you cleaned up your room for him. Or did he clean it for you?” All right, good thing Kane wasn’t present or he would be rolling his eyes so much right now.

“Jonathan was never in my room,” Rusty said. “After that first drop on Xpress, I kinda got a wakeup call, though. I mean, they said some things--”

“Mean things,” Maddox argued.

Rusty shook his head. “True things. So, as much as I hate those bastards right now, I just thought, you know. Clean up your act, Rusty Parker.”

“Ah, I see. No wonder you offered to help me clean my room, too.” Maddox’s eyes wandered again to the neatly ordered rows of books.

“He slept in your room,” Rusty said without being asked. “It was the only way to keep me away from that turkey. Do you believe me, Maddox?”

Maddox stood up and began to search for the thing that kept bothering him. He liked to keep his books neat, and there was one that stood out from the rest, slightly out of line. "I think I do," he murmured. That had to be the reason why he had thought his sheets smelled like Jonathan, right after their big fight. The night before Jonathan hadn't slept there, and the sheets had been washed right before the holiday, so...

He stopped in front of the book that wasn't aligned with the rest. Jonathan must have wanted to read that book. Even though he worked at the library, maybe it was one he hadn't had a chance to read. Maddox pulled the book out. It could be used as a pretext to go see Jonathan. He didn't know what to say exactly. Sure, everything Rusty said made sense, but... what was he going to do with all of the anger that had consumed him for days?

By simple force of habit, he opened the book and looked at the first pages. Jonathan had weird tastes if he was interested in this one.

"Something fell out," he heard Rusty say.

He noticed the small piece of paper on the floor and picked it up. He didn't recall putting any such thing in that book, so he stared at it. He had to flip it to read the words neatly written on it, black on white, by a hand he knew well.

*I love you, Maddox Kingsley*

He threw the book on the bed, not bothering to put it back.

"What's that? What does it say?" Rusty asked, jumping to his feet.

Maddox pressed the piece of paper against his chest and put his other hand up to stop Rusty from taking it away from him. "You stay right there," he said, while his face moved all its muscles into a smile he just couldn't stop.

"Do you want me to start cleaning?" Rusty asked.

Maddox breathed out, pressing one hand to his forehead and tried to think. Who would have thought it was hard to do that when you felt like bursting with happiness? "No," he said. "No cleaning for you."

Rusty's face fell. Maddox pulled him into a brief hug with one arm, still holding onto that precious note. Letting him go, he kept pointing at Rusty as he headed for the door. "You," he said, "I love you, man."

Rusty looked at him, completely confused. "I love you, too, man."

Maddox rushed down the stairs, taking them two by two, but for a completely different reason than before.

Dex and Kane jumped to their feet, surprised by the thunder of his steps on the stairs. Maddox landed at the foot of the staircase with a loud thump.

“What’s going on?” Dex asked.

“Jonathan loves me,” Maddox declared. “And Rusty can sing!”

Kane narrowed his eyes. “Our boy has finally lost it.” He nodded like he was old and gray and all he was missing was a pipe hanging from his mouth. “Rusty can’t sing for shit, so that means that the other thing is also--”

“Rusty, get down here and sing!” Maddox yelled and looked up.

Rusty made a horrified face from the top of the stairs.

“It’ll get you off cleaning duty,” Maddox promised.

“Um, okay,” Rusty replied.

Maddox didn’t wait for the aftermath of his actions. As soon as Rusty began to sing, the last thing he heard before he closed the door after himself was both Dex and Kane exploding at the same time.

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“Are you sure, JJ? But you’re going to be all alone,” Ray said while holding onto his bag as if he could prevent him from leaving.

“I just need to clear my head a little. I do want to get Maddox back, but so far, what I have done hasn’t worked. That means that I need to rethink my strategy, right?” He offered Ray as nice a smile as he could, given the sinkhole that now stood in his chest instead of his heart.

Ray shifted his weight from one foot to the other, but he handed Jonathan his bag. “Where are you going to stay?”

“Don’t ask, Ray. And I’ll be back by Sunday night, so don’t worry so much.”

“Off-grid like that,” Ray murmured and pursed his lips. “I have obviously failed as your bestie if I can’t convince you to stay. What if there’s an emergency?”

“That would be very unfortunate,” Jonathan agreed, “but also quite unlikely. And you didn’t fail as my bestie. I have yet to meet someone as sensitive about other people’s feeling as you are.”

“Buying me with compliments,” Ray mumbled. “It’s working, though. Bestie hug? It should keep you going while you sit there, in some dicey motel room, eating bags of chips and your feelings away. Make sure to slice them thinly.”

Jonathan accepted the hug and allowed Ray to hold him tightly for a bit longer than he was usually comfortable with. He hadn't explained much, but it wasn't as if he had many explanations to give. After the fallout with his family, he had done something similar, not eating chips or anything like that, but letting himself sink into silence until he could think clearly again. It was a bit much, even for someone like Ray to understand. He just needed the calm that came with being alone.

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Maddox didn't stop running until he reached Jonathan's door. He knocked loudly, ignoring how hard he was breathing, and how impatient he had to look. He still didn't know what to say, but it didn't matter. He'd just mix apologies and kisses, kisses and apologies. Jonathan would just have to—

Jonathan's roommate, Ray, opened the door.

"Hey, Ray, I need to talk to Jonathan," he said in a heartbeat.

To his surprise, Ray didn't move out of the door to let him in. All right, he understood that. "Look, Ray, it's a lot to explain, and I promise that I'll tell you everything. But I just have to talk to him."

"He's not here."

He hadn't expected hitting a snag like that, but still, it didn't mean a thing. "Where is he? When is he coming back?"

Ray crossed his arms and leaned against the doorjamb. "You were a bit of a dick the last time you were here, you know."

"I know, trust me," Maddox hurried to confirm. "But I'm not here for a fight. I'm here to apologize."

"All right, let's hear it," Ray said.

"Not to you," Maddox said quickly and then bit his tongue. "I mean, to you, too."

Ray just waved. "I'm not very hurt, though. But JJ, well, he..."

"He..." Maddox repeated after Ray, hoping for a continuation.

"He didn't say where he was going. But he'll come back Sunday night."

"Okay," Maddox breathed out. "I'll give him a call then."

"Don't bother," Ray said.

“Why?”

“Because he turned off his phone.”

That gave Maddox pause. “What? Why?”

Ray shrugged helplessly. “JJ things. He wouldn’t tell me. Anyway, I hope you’re going to apologize really nicely. JJ is heartbroken, and I’m blaming it all on you. Do you have any idea what it’s like to eat cereal for an entire week?”

“I can’t really say I do,” Maddox murmured. “So, did he stop cooking?”

Ray scowled. “No.”

“Did he burn the food?”

Another annoyed look from Ray decided him to can it. “Everyone knows you burn food when you’re happy in love. JJ just undercooked everything. I had to watch him to keep him from getting salmonella, he was that out of it.”

Maddox hung his head low and then risked a look at Ray. “For all that’s worth, I am really sorry, Ray.”

“Do you want to get back together with him?”

“Yeah.”

“Then wait for him. He waited for you to listen to him for a whole week. You can wait for a few days.”

It wasn’t like Jonathan’s roomie to close the door in anyone’s face, but Ray did that to him right at that moment. Maddox couldn’t say he blamed him.

### *Chapter Thirty-Eight – The Power Of Long Letters*

Jonathan had felt utterly alone before. It shouldn't have registered as something new and never experienced, and yet, it didn't fit. Time and time again, he reached for his phone, the need to call someone too great. But each time, through sheer willpower, he pulled his hand back and lay on the bed, his eyes on the ceiling.

Maddox didn't want to listen to him. He could insist, go on and on about the same thing, or send texts that would be left unread. Too bad there was so much technology involved; before, when someone sent a letter, at least there was some uncertainty involved. Whether the letter was left unread or not was left to fate alone, and the sender didn't have to wallow in despair while looking at a shiny screen and agonizing over the moment when they would be notified that their message had been read.

He got up from the bed, as the idea hit him. Who said he couldn't write a letter just like in olden times? Jonathan liked to think that his handwriting was readable enough, and that Maddox might get slightly curious at one point and open the letter that was destined for his eyes only. Invigorated by this new idea, he sat at the desk and grabbed his pen. What was he going to write now? Should he start with a perfunctory 'Dear Maddox'?

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"Why are you sitting there like there's fire underneath your ass?"

"None of your business," Maddox mumbled and stopped himself with great difficulty from checking his phone for any signs of life and, of course, for the time. Ray had said that Jonathan would return on Sunday evening, but who was to say if he was already back or not? He fiddled with his phone anyway.

Kane plopped down on the sofa, obviously determined not to let it drop. "Come on, what's going on?"

"I'm waiting for Jonathan," Maddox said under his breath.

"Is he coming over?" Kane asked patiently.

Maddox felt like bursting. After stumbling over that confession, he had felt restless and happy, but as the hours dragged by, even with all the mandatory studying and the equally mandatory goofing around with Rusty, he still felt as if time stood still. And with that, a new feeling, one that he hadn't experienced a lot in his life, came. He was uncertain. What was Jonathan doing all alone, his phone turned off? What if he changed his mind and decided during this alone-time that he no longer wanted anything to do with him?

"No," he replied with some difficulty.

“Then why are you waiting for him here?” Kane asked in the same old and wise manner that usually got on Maddox’s nerves.

This time, his friend’s logic hit home. “Right,” he said brightly. “Kane, you’re a fucking genius.” He jumped to his feet. “I’m going to wait for him by his dorm.”

“Hold on,” Kane said and caught his arm. “Rusty is tight-lipped as hell, and you’re not saying a thing. What’s going on? First, you say Jonathan loves you, and then you’re getting all antsy like this, which, by the way, is nothing like you.”

Maddox considered for a moment. Kane would get it; he was the kind who wished to get married even before finishing college, so he was, supposedly, to some degree, the romantic type. So, he reached inside his pocket and took out the note that was now a bit frayed at the edges.

Kane took it with a slight frown, read it, and then grinned. “Wow. Did he write it?”

“Yeah,” Maddox said.

“Shit, man,” Kane said and shook his head while leaning back on the sofa. “Coming from an icicle like Jonathan, this is huge stuff.”

“I know,” Maddox said and grabbed the note back. “But he left for the weekend and turned off his phone, so I have no idea when he’s coming back and, you know.” He threw his arms in the air in an exasperated gesture.

“I get it,” Kane said and nodded in sympathy. “Well, seeing how the finals are starting tomorrow, I bet that Jonathan, who’s all for perfect grades, will be back at a reasonable hour tonight. Just go and wait for him in front of his dorm. But first, check to see if he turned his phone back on.”

Maddox smiled. Now that was good advice. “Not yet,” he said after checking his phone briefly.

“Then, no more waiting around here, lover boy,” Kane said with a grin. “Just go meet up with him. I bet he’s going to be all crazy about seeing you. In his very subdued, gentleman-like manner, of course. He will probably let out a slight ‘yay’,” he added and made a small victory gesture with one hand.

Maddox didn’t need any more encouragement. He also had another idea. When Jonathan was going to turn his phone back on, he was going to see his message first. He began typing as he walked out the door.

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Jonathan wasn't surprised at the chime of incoming messages the moment he turned on his phone. He smiled at Ray's emojis that signaled that his bestie was very, very hungry in his absence, and his heart skipped a beat at seeing another message, this time from Maddox.

*As some songs say, I've been a fool. I just want to say this. I found your note. And I feel just the same. And now, I'm hanging out in front of your dorm, wishing I wasn't stupid. It was just... well, I guess I went a bit nuts seeing you with another guy even if it wasn't anything like that. So, can you forgive me? I promise I'll work hard for that 'yes'.*

Jonathan slowed down. Could Maddox be talking about that note? It had to be, although that was something Maddox was supposed to find a lot later. A smile stretched his entire face to the point of hurting. He was about to start running toward the dorm, when his phone chimed with another incoming message. He opened it without checking the sender, and his feet came to a screeching halt.

*Knock, knock, Hamilton... don't bother checking from whom this is. It looks like your pristine reputation is anything but. Guess what's about to drop on Xpress next. Not necessarily. It's up to you.*

He recognized the video from the first frames and closed it quickly. The air was rushing in and out of his lungs, making him dizzy. Another message came.

*We're generous. We'll let you get through your finals, but after, transfer back to the gilded hole you crawled from. That is if you don't want us to show the entire Sunny Hill just who you truly are. Question: were both of you high while shooting this little clip, or did you just hide it very well? It doesn't matter. If you dare to come back to Sunny Hill after winter break, Santa is going to bring you a belated gift. You know, the kind fit for naughty kids.*

*PS. Think of Maddox. Do you really want him to see you with another man's cock in your mouth? (There's no actual timestamp, so...)*

This couldn't be. Jonathan forced himself to breathe. He sat down where he was on the sidewalk and caught his head in his hands, while anger, guilt, and despair coursed through him, breaking him in pieces. One mistake was all it took, didn't it? One mistake and he was done for. He pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes and let out a low groan. It was already late. No one else was there, and if they were, they would think he was mad.

He had run away in the hope that the past would have too short legs to catch up with him. What a false hope! The past always caught up with you, no matter who you were. In this age of shared information, how could he truly hope that the past would stay buried?

What was he going to do? Was he going to wait and face the same treatment? All the looks, the sneers, the laughter, but multiplied to fit the world of Sunny Hill, a lot bigger than his old

school? How was he going to live through that? Just imagining it left him heaving and gasping for air.

And yes, there was also Maddox. Maddox, who did love him and was also very jealous. No, he could be convinced that it was an old thing, right? Jonathan rocked his body gently, trying to fit inside his mind all the possibilities, all the hurt that came with something like that, and realized that he couldn't, not by a long shot.

It took him several minutes to push himself up to his feet and drag himself toward the dorm. Was it Connor who was doing all this? Xpress was just a gossip rag, but this? This was personal, not just something for the fun of it. Someone was out to hurt him, and Jonathan could think of no one else but Connor, Connor who must have felt deeply insulted the last time they talked.

“Jonathan?”

He was startled by the sudden calling of his name and stared around, completely disoriented.

“Hey, are you all right?” Maddox walked toward him, looking rightfully worried.

“I’m fine,” he replied quickly. “Um, what are you doing here?”

“I sent you a message earlier.”

Jonathan felt his phone as heavy as a ten-pound rock in his pocket. “Right, yes, yes, I saw it.” He rubbed his temples. “It’s... just not a good time. To talk, I mean.”

Maddox stopped before reaching him. “You’re mad at me, right?”

Jonathan felt his temples throbbing. He needed to find a place to hide. He just couldn't stay there anymore. “You...” he pulled the words out of himself by force, “...you didn't believe me.”

Maddox took a small step forward. “I get it. I totally do. I mean, all right, I was a huge jerk all week. But--”

Jonathan moved away from Maddox's touch. “We'll talk. Later. Now, I'm just... I need to go.”

“Jonathan,” Maddox called out for him as he turned on his heel to leave. “I just want you to know, okay?” His voice was soft like a breeze. “That I love you, too.”

Jonathan felt the choking growing unbearable. He just nodded and moved away. “I have to go, Maddox. Goodbye.” He rushed inside the dorm building, hoping that Maddox didn't follow. And he didn't, which was the only blessing he could think of right now.

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Maddox stood there, overcome by guilt. Jonathan looked disturbed for some reason, and if things were how they had been before, he would just hurry after him and hold him and ask him what was wrong, but the chances were his boyfriend was like that because of him, and that meant that he should just give him enough space to process all that. They would come around, the both of them, and now, that Jonathan was back, they had all the time in the world to make it right.

Still, a part of him wanted to go after Jonathan and just take him in his arms. His phone rang, and while he tried to ignore it for a few moments more, it sounded so insistent that he decided to take it.

“Mom?” he asked, not quite believing that she was calling at that hour. “Is everything all right? Dad--”

“Everything’s all right,” his mom hurried to assure him. “I just wanted everyone else to be asleep so that I could talk to you.”

For a moment, he wanted to tell her that it wasn’t a good time, that he needed to think of how to talk to Jonathan after hurting him like that, but he recalled on what terms he had left home the last time, and ignoring her right now wasn’t an option.

“All right,” he said. “How are you, mom? Are you still upset with me?”

“That is what I wanted to talk to you about.” A pause followed, and Maddox had learned to respect each time that happened. It meant that his mom was choosing her words carefully, and the message she wanted to convey was very important. “Maddox, you know me. I just have a mean temper.”

He laughed softly and began walking back, toward his house. “I know that. I still recall that spanking you gave me when I was eight because I broke dad’s vintage radio.”

A short, horrified gasp at the other end assured him that she remembered as well. “I only slapped your butt once. That was all. How can you call it a spanking?”

“That’s what it felt like,” he said defensively, but then he began laughing. “I really did a bad thing. I guess I was too curious.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong, after all. And your dad had spares. Of course, he should have let me know that before I spanked your ass.”

Maddox shook his head in mirth. Their mom rarely administered corporal punishment, hence the shock at that time. But she had cooked his favorites for a week and even bought him a new console, so the incident had been long forgiven, even if not forgotten.

“What did you want to tell me?” he asked.

His mom drew a long sigh. “I got ahead of myself the last time you were here, a bit too much. So, I took some time and thought about it. What do you say about bringing Jonathan with you for Christmas? At least for a day before or something like that, in case he plans on going to see his parents later?”

Maddox felt his tongue getting all tied up.

“I apologize for going through the roof like that at Thanksgiving,” she added.

“What made you change your mind?” he asked.

“Your sister kept the picture of you and him together. And she kept on sticking it under our noses after you left. I believe that the boy is in love with you, Maddox,” she said softly.

He had the confirmation of that right in his pocket. Only he didn’t have the boy, too. How could he explain that to his mom, though? He could try. “I kind of fucked up, mom.”

“Language, Maddox,” she said with a sigh. “What did you fuck up?”

“I got jealous,” he said in a meek voice. “I believed what some people said, and I didn’t believe him.”

“If you got jealous, that’s because you’re a Kingsley,” his mom replied promptly. “So, do what all Kingsleys do. Apologize.”

“I did, but--”

“No ‘buts’. I can see that you like this boy a lot, Maddox.”

“I love him,” Maddox insisted.

“I can see that you love him,” his mom corrected herself. “Then do your best. Bring him to us this Christmas, or at least a day or two before. I know you can do it. Just be insistent enough. It worked for your dad.”

“For real?” Maddox asked with a grin.

“Do you think we’ve always been as calm and settled as you know us to be? Trust me, we had our very turbulent phase.”

“Um, tell me about it?”

“Another time. Your dad just started to roam the house. He probably thinks I got abducted by aliens.”

“Mom, dad doesn’t believe in aliens.”

“Right. You don’t know what kind of documentaries he watches at night.”

“I’ll take your word for it, then.”

“Bring the boy with you, Maddox. We want to meet him.”

“I’ll try, mom.”

“Don’t just try, do it. That’s the Kingsley way.”

“Really? It sounded to me like the slogan--”

“I need to go. Your dad is getting close. Bye, pumpkin.”

Maddox felt his good mood returning. His mom was right. It wasn’t like Kingsleys to give up, and, sure thing, Jonathan deserved to be fought for, no matter what that entailed. He threw another look at Jonathan’s dorm, searching for his window. No light was in sight, which meant that he must have gone to bed already. Of course, finals week started tomorrow. Jonathan would want to get his sleep so that he could perform well on the exams. And, most probably, he needed to do the same. It wasn’t like Jonathan had refused to talk to him or anything like that; he had just said ‘later’. So ‘later’ it had to be.

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Jonathan knew it would be impossible to avoid Ray, so he repeated the words he needed to say while climbing the stairs, words that would, possibly, stop his bestie from trying to find out what was going on.

Ray opened the door before he could reach for the handle, taking him by surprise. “JJ,” he exclaimed and hugged him tightly. Then, he pulled him inside. “Maddox came by on Friday, you know? He so wants to get back together with you. Did you eat of lot of junk food? I hope not. Everybody says it ruins your face, and you don’t want that now that Maddox--” Ray stopped his tirade and stared at him once they were inside and behind the closed door. “JJ, what’s wrong?”

It was impossible to stop, he realized, as he took out his phone and handed it to Ray. “I won’t be able to return to Sunny Hill after Christmas break.”

Ray blinked a few times, and his eyes grew wide, but he didn’t say a word as he took the phone. Jonathan leaned against the door and closed his eyes. If there was someone in the entire world in front of whom he didn’t feel shame, it was this person who proved to have such a big soul and accept him for who he was, no questions asked.

“This is awful,” Ray said, and Jonathan could tell that his bestie hadn’t watched more than several seconds to understand what the video was about. “They can’t do this. They must be punished.”

Jonathan took his phone back and headed for his room, all the energy drained out of him. He needed to collapse and not think of anything. Finals started tomorrow, and he wouldn't be able to think of anything else while focusing on them.

"JJ," Ray called after him, "you're not going to do as they say."

"I have no choice, Ray," he replied. "I don't need a repetition of what happened at my previous school. I hope you can understand."

"I don't and I won't," Ray said and followed him.

"Please don't turn on the light." Jonathan lay on the bed face first and Ray sat by his side. He felt Ray's sympathetic hand on his shoulder and closed his eyes.

"That was what they did at your old school? Did they laugh at you?" Ray asked quietly while stroking his shoulder.

"For days and weeks, everywhere I went. At first, I thought I could just shrug it off," Jonathan said in a monotone. "That I was this rebellious soul," he said with a snort, "that did nothing according to the norm and whatnot. But it wasn't like that. I was just this stupid guy who ended up sucking the wrong dick. And then became the laughingstock of the entire school. Then, the pranks," he added and stopped.

"If you don't want to tell me--"

"No. I suppose I want to tell someone, and I know you don't judge me."

"That's right," Ray confirmed.

Jonathan covered his face, as much as he could in that position. "I got the full treatment. Sex toys left on my desk, nasty comments written on the bathroom walls, whispers behind my back, and words thrown in my face. I had no idea a bunch of boys almost in their twenties would be so hungry for this kind of thing," he said. "It was like, finally, their lives had meaning. I was free game and their purpose was to bring me down at all costs. And it was so easy."

"I hate those guys," Ray said. "But Sunny Hill is different, Jonathan. You don't have to leave. Come on, if it helps, I'll make a sex tape, too."

Jonathan laughed despite feeling horribly down. "I don't think Hanna would agree to something like that, Ray."

"It will be solo action, then," Ray said with conviction. "Although, who would want to see me jerking off?"

Jonathan sighed. "You might be surprised, Ray. Don't sell yourself short. But jokes aside, people are the same everywhere. If they see someone down, they'll kick them. It's just human nature."

“Not my human nature,” Ray countered.

“I know,” Jonathan replied quietly. “You’re one of the best people I’ve ever met in my life.”

“Maddox is a good person, too,” Ray reminded him.

“He is,” Jonathan agreed. “And I think I’ve made enough trouble for him as things stand.”

“Why do you sound like you’re giving up on him? All because of Xpress? Sorry, I didn’t mean to speak so loudly.”

“It’s all right, Ray, you don’t have to apologize. The thing is, Maddox got jealous of Rusty, and he didn’t have a reason. Imagine how he’s going to feel after seeing me... like that.”

Ray let out a long exasperated groan. “JJ, you can’t do that. I mean, all right, maybe you’re right about Maddox getting pissy, but he’ll get over it. I mean, it’s not like you didn’t have other guys before him. Even if it was just the one. I mean, this one. Ugh, I suck at this, and I hate it.”

“You don’t, and you’re maybe right,” Jonathan hurried to assure him. “But I need to think of what I’m going to do. I can’t face the same thing as before. I just can’t. I know that it might sound to you like it’s not some big deal, but for me--”

“Say no more, JJ,” Ray said and squeezed his shoulder. “I understand what you went through. What we, no, I need to do is to ensure that Sunny Hill is not going to be a repeat experience for you.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“I have no idea right now,” Ray said brightly. “But there’s no way, there’s absolutely no way that I’m losing my bestie and my roommate. Especially one who is keeping me alive with good food.”

Jonathan laughed softly. “Sometimes, I think you only like me for my food, Ray.”

“That’s not true. Do you mind if I lie down with you?”

“No, not at all.” Jonathan scooted over to make room for Ray. There was comfort in having someone so close. It was a sort of intimacy that had nothing to do with sex, yet it made him feel as close to another human being as he could be.

“JJ, I’ve never told you why I transferred.”

Jonathan turned toward Ray. “And I never asked. See, I’m not that good a bestie.”

“Thing is, I never adapted there. I was friends with some girls, and that was all. Since middle school, you’re the first boy friend I’ve made.”

“That can’t be true. You’re the kind of guy that everybody loves being friends with,” Jonathan said.

“I’m telling you... It’s not like I was bullied or anything, but guys usually ignored me. Probably, that’s why the girls thought I was gay,” Ray added as if he just got that revelation. “And it’s because of you that I’ve gotten to meet so many other people. Did you know that I even won the wet t-shirt contest?”

Jonathan laughed with Ray. “I remember being there, too.”

“Oh, you were?” Ray asked, feigning incredulity. “Funny thing, I don’t recall seeing you there. Probably because it was one of the high points of my social career. I just couldn’t see anyone else. I’m joking, JJ, but here, I’ve gotten into a totally different world. I became friends with you instantly, and you even introduced me to the most popular group on campus. And trust me when I tell you, Maddox and his besties are nothing like the cliques where I came from. They have a right to be called the Amazing Four, because, frankly, they’re pretty amazing. Not like the meatheads and other popular douches from other colleges.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“See? There are plenty of good people here, at Sunny Hill. And there’s also Hanna, and she’s friends with a lot of good people, too. Don’t leave, JJ, not because of that stupid Xpress. I promise I’ll never visit that page again.”

Jonathan appreciated Ray’s friendship and all that came with it. But it was a pretty huge ask, even if it came from Ray, and he didn’t believe himself ready to face the possibility of that kind of situation again, nor would he ever be ready. “We have finals to worry about,” he said in a voice he tried to keep light. “Let’s ignore Xpress for now. They told me that they would allow me to take my exams.”

“Oh, really?” Ray murmured. “What about Maddox?”

“Maddox,” Jonathan said with a heartfelt sigh. “I’ll have to rely on the power of long letters.”

“What’s that?” Ray asked.

His bestie didn’t insist when he didn’t answer. He lay there, by his side, without saying another word, until he drifted off to sleep.

### *Chapter Thirty-Nine – No Escape*

Avoiding Maddox was easy, as everyone was caught in the flurry of nervous excitement caused by finals. Jonathan had a feeling that Maddox was giving him space, which he very much appreciated. They exchanged a few polite words when they happened to meet around campus, but there was a tacit understanding between them that they had to let the exams pass so that they could talk about themselves and their relationship. That only made Jonathan fall even more madly in love with Maddox, as it proved he had a big heart and also understood where they were.

Of course, Maddox was wrong, and Jonathan couldn't let him know the real reason why he wasn't running to him, crazy enough to kiss him in front of the entire school once more, and swear to him that he would never lie again, not even by omission. The letter he had written to Maddox during his weekend away had suffered a few amendments based on that decision, and Jonathan could only hope that it would make things easier once everything blew over.

He held absolutely no hopes that Xpress would honor the deal of not releasing the video. Whoever was behind that awful publication was only giving him the necessary breather to run away before the storm arrived. Jonathan wasn't sure if he was grateful for that.

“Do you think it's worth working yourself to the bone just so that you ace them all?”

The question took him by surprise, and not only that, the person uttering the words, most of all.

“Connor,” he said stiffly and adjusted the shoulder strap of his bag. He was moving between buildings and wouldn't say that he wished for any kind of company, let alone Connor's company. “I'd appreciate it if you didn't talk to me at all.”

Connor seemed genuinely surprised by his blunt rejection. He frowned and began walking by his side, even if uninvited. “No offense, Jonathan, but you look like shit. There are such things as breaks, you know? The reason why I stopped to talk to you is because we exchanged some words the last time--”

Jonathan felt his fingers tremble. “Don't worry about a thing, Connor. I meant those words, and I have no intention of taking them back. So, if you think I'm going to apologize, think again.”

“You're very difficult to talk to these days. Rumor has it that Maddox wants to get back with you. Your academic performance is above anyone else's, and it looks like everyone is on your side. That incident with Rusty is already water under the bridge. So, what's eating you?”

Jonathan couldn't believe the guy's audacity to taunt him like that. He grabbed Connor by the front of his shirt, making the guy yelp. Then, he stared him in the face. “Funny that you're the person asking me that,” he said through his teeth.

Connor's frown deepened and he put his hands on Jonathan's wrists, struggling to get away from him. “You're acting really strange. I'm just worried a bit about you, is all.”

“Worried?” Jonathan now trembled from head to toes, and it took him everything he had not to shake Connor and make him repent for every lie he had published in Xpress probably since the moment he had set foot on Sunny Hill grounds. “You, worried about me?”

Connor was leaning back now, in poorly concealed fear. He looked like he was afraid that he would get a punch in the face. Jonathan hadn’t thought him to be such a coward. He pushed him away in disgust. “Don’t worry, Connor. Your blackmail holds.”

“What? What blackmail?” Connor’s confused question followed him as he walked away.

The nerve of the guy. There was no point in confronting him over the video; he would deny everything like last time, and he seemed to be quite the actor. And as much as he wanted to give Connor a piece of his mind, it would only make the situation worse. At least as things allegedly stood now, he was supposed to have until the end of the week to make a run for it.

*Tic-toc, tic-toc, Hamilton. Keep that pretty head low. We have such itchy fingers, you know? Gosh, such a tasty piece of gossip, and we just decided to be magnanimous. Is our speech fine enough for the likes of you? Play nice, and we’ll play nice, too.*

Jonathan gritted his teeth. A part of him wanted to smash the phone against the sidewalk, just so that he could breathe. He looked over his shoulder to see if Connor really had the nerve to send him a message so quickly after their encounter. Connor was nowhere in sight, and Jonathan tried to call the unknown number again, in hope that his tormentor would be stupid enough to pick up.

No such luck, of course.

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“Why aren’t you and Jonathan back together?” Rusty asked.

Dex and Kane stopped for a moment to raise their heads, but then, they pretended to continue studying, although Maddox could swear that their ears were perked up and ready to receive an explanation.

“It’s finals week, duh,” Maddox pointed out. “Jonathan told me that we would talk later, so I’m giving him space.”

Rusty pursed his lips and twiddled his thumbs, as he slouched on the sofa, his hands linked over his stomach. “That’s way too much space,” he eventually said.

“Yeah,” Dex seconded.

“Ditto,” Kane added.

Maddox groaned. “C’mon, guys, he’s not going to take a break from studying right now just so that we can get back together. I can wait. And I need to show him that I can wait.”

“Something’s fishy,” Rusty declared. “Last week, Jonathan was about to fall on his knees and beg you to get back together.”

“Yeah, but well, I waited too long to apologize,” Maddox said and pulled at his collar. “All right, I was an ass. It’s normal that he’s a little upset with me. And we have finals! Maybe we all mooch on our families for money, but he has to keep that scholarship. It’s not an option for him.” He hoped his exasperation sounded genuine enough. He was only a little short of plucking daisies and playing ‘he loves me, he loves me not’.

“Nope, nope, nope,” Rusty said and shook his head vigorously. “Jonathan’s got it bad for you since day one, and it’s not like him to change his mind.”

“You sure?” Maddox asked and rolled his eyes.

“I made him say out loud that he’s in love with you,” Rusty said promptly. “That’s not a guy who goes back on his words a week or so into the future.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Kane intervened, “let’s roll back a little. When did you force Jonathan to admit his feelings for Maddox, Rusty?”

Rusty lolled his head to one side and then threw Kane a funny stare.

“It had to have been during the ‘incident’,” Dex hopped on board with an explanation while hooking his fingers in the air as he said the last word.

“That must have been what gave Jonathan the courage to write that note,” Kane said brightly.

“What note?” Dex asked.

“What did it say in the note?” Rusty asked.

His friends had different pieces of information about where his love life stood. He groaned loudly again. “Jonathan left a note in a book in my room, telling me he loved me, and that’s all,” he said quickly. “Is everyone now up to speed? What’s next? Should we start braiding each other’s hair?”

Dex snorted, Kane rolled his eyes, but Rusty ran his hands through his tousled strands. “Do you think I’d look good in braids?”

“No,” Maddox said with a scowl. “You’d look like an idiot.”

Rusty appeared to be completely unfazed by his words and turned toward their other two friends. “Any second opinions?”

Dex smirked and said nothing. Kane leaned back in his chair and observed Rusty through his eyelashes. “Braids are not important. What could be fishy, Rusty?”

“Finally, someone asks,” Rusty said and threw his arms in the air. “I don’t know, though,” he added and let his arms drop in disappointment at himself. “I mean, Jonathan should be here, sitting in Maddox’s lap with them making doe eyes at each other until someone tells them to get a room. And Maddox’s room is upstairs, so they’d only have to--”

“We get the picture,” Dex interrupted him. “Rusty has a point. Something’s not right about Jonathan not wanting to rush back into your arms like a fairytale princess.”

“Prince,” Rusty corrected him.

“Prince,” Dex admitted his error.

“He’s just upset, and he’s right,” Maddox insisted, even though he didn’t like how petulant he sounded. The fact that Jonathan was still keeping his distance was irking him to no end. All right, they couldn’t just hop in bed again and fuck each other silly, but they could hold hands and share kisses.

It was painful how well he remembered Jonathan’s last kiss. At the time, he hadn’t even paid too much attention like someone would who was used to always ordering the tastiest desserts on the menu and then only taking a bite, but now it felt like such a precious experience that he carried in his heart and mind like nothing else.

His friends would laugh if they knew what he was thinking, how romantic he had gotten all of a sudden. Kane narrowed his eyes, Dex quirked an eyebrow, and Rusty leaned forward with a grin. “What?” he asked, all his alarm sensors tingling.

“You looked a little bit weird just now,” Dex said. ‘Weird’ was, probably, a tactful word in Dex’s vocabulary.

“Weird like how?”

“Like a fair maiden left at the altar,” Kane added and laughed at his own stupid joke.

“Like you miss him a lot,” Rusty added, the most delicate of all his three friends, much to his surprise. But Rusty, being Rusty, couldn’t stop there. He gave Maddox a long and intent once-over. “When did you guys fuck last?”

Maddox pursed his lips, frowned, and made a gesture with his hands as if he would get a lot of satisfaction if he could just wring Rusty’s neck. Instead of that, he tortured nothing but the empty air that, luckily, couldn’t feel a thing.

“Finals are not going to take forever,” Kane pointed out. “Wait it out. I doubt Jonathan’s going to have a change of heart.”

Well, he was worried about that, actually; there was a possibility that Jonathan had already had that change of heart. But no, it couldn't be because one look from him was enough to tell him that the feelings they felt toward one another were still mutual. Their eyes said everything. The polite words they exchanged, not so much.

Kane was right, and it only strengthened his hopes. At the end of the week, he would get Jonathan alone, and then they would have that meaningful talk that would end up with them in the same bed, doing all those things he missed doing – *yeah, Rusty, you crazy mofo, you're right.*

“Still, something's fishy,” Rusty intervened once more.

“If you can't say what is, then just go grab a book or something,” Kane advised him.

Rusty took advantage that Kane seemed already absorbed by his textbooks and started making faces. A crumpled piece of paper hit him in the face. Apparently, he had missed that Dex was looking straight at him.

Maddox sighed and turned toward his own study materials. Because of the excellent project with Jonathan for Statistics, his situation had already gone through an improvement this semester. Just one of the many things he had to be grateful for since having Jonathan.

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Ray was barring the way, which, for certain, was a problem.

“Ray,” Jonathan started meekly.

“Are you running away, JJ? We've barely finished our finals.”

He sighed and looked away. The luggage in his hand was a dead giveaway, and Ray eyed it with unease.

“Where are you even going to go?” Ray continued.

“Home. My parents seemed willing to,” he stopped for a short sigh, “take me back the last time we spoke. Until I figure out what to do next, I can only say that I won't be homeless.”

Ray's face transformed as he talked, from surprise to a frown and then to a bit of a puzzled expression. “What you're going to do next is that you will come back and be my roommate again. You didn't do anything rash and inform anyone official that you're not coming back, right?”

“No, not yet. That's something else I need to figure out how to do without appearing like an ungrateful brat. After all, the people here have always been nice to me.”

“Except that piece of garbage, Xpress,” Ray mumbled. “I’m working on my plan, you know? The one that will make sure that you’re not going to be treated here like you were at your old school.”

Jonathan’s heart filled with fondness at Ray’s words. “You wouldn’t be my bestie otherwise.” He rubbed his forehead with his free hand. “But I don’t know if I have the strength, Ray. And Maddox will become embarrassed about me, too.”

“Is that a lie you tell yourself on a daily basis, or something? Maddox will never be like that with you. Just jealous, fine, but that’s another good sign. He really cares about you.”

He hadn’t let Ray know of Maddox’s confession. If he did, he had a feeling that Ray would resort to something crazy, like tying him to a chair and forbidding him from leaving completely.

“I know he does. But things like this can take a toll on anyone. Drew, as insensitive as he was when the video went, let’s say, locally viral,” he explained with a grimace, “he got into a few fights with some of our fellow students.” He said the last words painfully.

“So, he didn’t release the video?” Ray asked and frowned a bit. “But I thought--”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize that it would be misinterpreted like that. He was just negligent, leaving his phone around, unlocked and all. Someone else must have done it, and while he saved his skin and threw me to the wolves, at least of that I’m sure. It wasn’t at all in his interest, either, to have a video of him getting high all over the place.”

“He didn’t care about the other thing, naturally,” Ray said with obvious pique.

“No, he didn’t. Always looking out for number one, Drew,” Jonathan admitted. “Look, I’ll send you my parents’ address. I don’t intend to become a stranger, not after I found a friend as amazing as you are.”

“Bestie,” Ray corrected him. “Best friend. Hug?”

Jonathan couldn’t say ‘no’ to that. Ray squeezed him tightly. “I forgive you for running away, but only for now. As soon as my plan is in place, I’ll drag you back from the castle you live in.”

“It’s not a castle, Ray.”

“Whatever. I’d fight a dragon to get you, though. Don’t you forget that.”

Even if it was only fun banter between friends, Jonathan felt a couple of tears stinging his eyes as he held Ray close for a moment. “I never will,” he promised and walked out the door.

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He was almost off the campus grounds when a heavy hand landed on his shoulder, forcing him to stop. “Hamilton, where do you think you’re going?”

Jonathan let out a long sigh but turned to face the guy anyway. “Rusty,” he said and shook his head. “I thought you weren’t talking to me for some reason.”

Rusty’s face lit up with a goofy grin, completely in contrast with his booming voice from earlier. “The sweater incident was a bit too much. And I didn’t want Maddox to think that I’m wooing you or something. Is that right? To say ‘wooing’?”

Jonathan rolled his eyes. “You two are getting along just fine now, right? I doubt he’d still be jealous of you.”

“You don’t know him. He’s a monster,” Rusty declared theatrically. “He even made me study.”

“Oh, the pain, the horror,” Jonathan commented, a bit amused.

“But we’re done with all that,” Rusty said cheerfully. “So, where are you going?” He looked at the luggage in Jonathan’s hand just as Ray had earlier.

“I’m going to talk to my parents. They won’t be so cold-hearted as not to put me up for Christmas.”

“Hmm,” Rusty commented and put one fist under his chin. “But Maddox wants you home with him for Christmas.”

“He does?” Jonathan asked. He still had a letter to deliver, and his plans included a short meeting with Maddox, only not right now. He wasn’t sure he could face him and not crumble to pieces.

“He told me that his mom said so.”

“Oh,” Jonathan managed with some difficulty. “But I thought that his parents, you know, were not very fond... I’m sorry. I don’t know how much Maddox shares with you.”

“Everything,” Rusty said emphatically. “His mom said that at least before Christmas, he should bring you for a day or two.”

That actually solved his problem of seeing Maddox one last time and making an attempt at what he hoped would be a clean break without anyone being hurt too much. “Do you happen to have Maddox’s address?” he asked.

Rusty snorted. “Of course. Are you going to see him?”

“Yes. Before Christmas. But... just don’t tell him. I want it to be a surprise.” He even forced himself to smile, just to throw Rusty off. More like he didn’t want to get Maddox’s hopes high

for no reason. He had seen plenty of those puppy stares during the week to know that it wouldn't be easy.

“Okay. Sending it to you right now,” Rusty said and pulled out his phone.

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“I can't believe that he left like that. He knew how much I wanted to... Ah, whatever. He'll get an earful when we get back to campus after winter break,” Maddox said and opened the fridge for no particular reason. “I'm not going to beg him over the phone.”

Kane sounded sympathetic at the other end. “Make sure to tame this one, Maddox. Jonathan surely likes getting away a lot.”

“Yeah, he's like a wild horse or something. Mom is like really disappointed, though. I didn't think she would be so upset.”

“She must be uber curious about him,” Kane offered. “We're on for New Year's, though, Jonathan or not, right?”

“Yeah, totally. I wouldn't miss it. And I'll drag Rusty there, as well.”

It wouldn't be a winter break without them celebrating together. Christmas was for family, New Year's was for friends. And Dex's dads had already rented a cozy mountain lodge for them to have as much fun and snow as they wanted.

His mom was in the doorway, watching him and smiling. Maddox closed the fridge door. “Gotta go, man. I feel a disturbance in the Force.”

His mom rolled her eyes and made a motion with her kitchen towel like she wanted to bludgeon him with it. Maddox grinned as he slipped his phone into his back pocket. “Any errands you want me to run?”

“No, I just thought it was Jonathan calling. Are you sure you apologized properly?”

“Yeah, totally. He must have made up with his parents, and that's why he hurried home like that.”

His mom was looking at him like she wasn't completely buying it. “You must have done something really bad. You're just too lovable to leave like this on Christmas otherwise.”

So, his mom was scolding and complimenting him at the same time. But Maddox liked to think that he had his pride, too. Well, maybe. He'd probably end up sending message after message tonight before he went to sleep.

The doorbell chimed cheerfully. His mom turned to go answer it, but that was as good an opportunity as any to pretend to be helpful. “I’ll get that,” he said and hurried down the hallway.

He pulled the front door wide open, despite the snow that had started just earlier. And then, his breath caught in his throat, and his heart started beating in its familiar rhythm again. A couple of feet from him, at the top of the steps, half-turned from him and looking up, several snowflakes caught in his hair, stood Jonathan.

His beautiful amber eyes turned toward him and lit up with warmth as they landed on him. “Maddox, hi. Rusty told me where you live. I hope I’m not inconveniencing you.”

Maddox felt for a moment as if he couldn’t breathe because he was so happy. “Inconveniencing, wow. Just get inside already.” He didn’t wait for Jonathan to heed the invitation and grabbed his arm to pull him over the threshold.

Jonathan offered him a giddy smile, and Maddox threw one cautious look down the hallway and then kissed him on the lips. Jonathan’s arms around him were familiar and strong, and Maddox hugged him back tightly, forgetting all about his plans of trying and failing to ignore his boyfriend.

“Ahem,” someone cleared her throat loudly.

They broke off like guilty kids.

“Mom, this is Jonathan,” Maddox said and rubbed the back of his head, trying hard not to blush for being caught like that.

“Hello, Mrs. Kingsley,” Jonathan said politely. “I promise I’m not going to disturb your Christmas preparations. I just meant to drop by and see Maddox for a bit, and then I’ll be on my way.”

Maddox tensed on reflex. So, Jonathan didn’t plan on staying. Yeah, like he would let that happen. Unless there was some life-or-death situation that required Jonathan’s presence that very moment, he would stay put.

“Nobody calls me Mrs. Kingsley,” his mom said with a small snort. “Call me Florence. And what’s this nonsense about not staying? You’re invited. I’m not sure if Maddox told you.” She threw him a pointed look. “Now, come, come, everybody’s dying to get to know you.”

Jonathan appeared to hesitate for a moment, but Maddox’s mom was not the kind to let people hesitate for too long in her presence. She practically forced him to walk inside, took his luggage and shoved it into Maddox’s arms, and even, somehow, managed to help him out of his coat.

“Sit over there,” she ordered Jonathan while pointing at the sofa in the living room and holding his coat like it was some precious object. “I’m just going to hang this up to dry a little, and then

you'll get to meet everyone. Oh, and I'm making tea. Do you have a favorite? I have everything."

Jonathan seemed a bit baffled by the warm and enthusiastic welcome. "Everything's fine, Mrs. ... Florence. Please, do not trouble yourself for my sake."

Maddox's mom smiled from ear to ear. Then, she grabbed Maddox and pushed him up the stairs. "Put his luggage in your room. He'll at least spend the night," she whispered to him, while stealing glances toward the living room as if she expected Jonathan to bolt without his coat and luggage.

"In my room?" Maddox mumbled, astonished at his mom's rapid arrangements.

"Where else? Pumpkin, he's even more gorgeous in person. And so polite. If I were thirty-five years younger and had not met your father, I'd put him in my room."

"He's not into girls, mom," Maddox protested. "You and Al, both, I swear," he groaned but allowed her to push him further up the stairs.

"Good thing he's not. This is how I get the most handsome son-in-law in the whole town. And the way he speaks, so distinguished. And this coat," she commented while feeling the fabric. "You're marrying up, Maddox."

"Mom, you're scaring me. No one's getting married," he protested.

She stole another look toward the living room. Did Jonathan feel weirded out already? Maddox wondered if he could hear them whispering at the foot of the stairs.

"Not yet," she said promptly, and this time gave him a good shove to get him to hurry.

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He had expected to ask Maddox outside for a bit, and then offer him an explanation that made sense, plus hand him the letter. But it had all happened very fast, the look in Maddox's eyes of pure happiness, the kiss in the hallway, and of course, the mom dragging him inside and welcoming him so warmly that he couldn't just make a run for it.

Hurried steps barreled toward the living room, startling him. In a moment, he was looking at a young attractive girl in goth makeup. "Oh. My. Gosh," she exclaimed so loudly that Jonathan worried that the windows rattled at the volume of her voice. "You're Jonathan!"

He smiled and stood up from the sofa. Then he walked toward her, his hand extended. "Yes, you guessed right."

She didn't take his hand, but instead flung herself into his arms, taking him by surprise. "I'm Alicia, Maddox's older sister. You can call me Al."

“Older?” Jonathan asked. Ah, that was right. Maddox was the youngest of all his siblings, so everyone else was older than he was. Alicia actually looked a bit younger than Maddox, but maybe it was how cute she was that made it easy for people to mistake her age.

“By two years, but he’s like, totally, my twin.” She seemed very excited to see him there. She nonchalantly took his hand and then they both sat on the sofa. “Wait till everyone sees you. You’re here for Christmas? You must stay. I know it’s only two days from now, but we’ll make sure you get presents, too.”

“I don’t want to inconvenience you and your family--”

“What inconvenience?” Florence walked into the room with a tray in her hands that Alicia immediately jumped to take from her. They fussed a little while they somehow managed to work in synch without spilling any tea. He felt like they were paying him way too much attention, but couldn’t say that he was displeased about it. The atmosphere in that house made his lips curl in a smile even if he struggled against it, which he didn’t. “You’ll at least stay until tomorrow.”

Jonathan wanted to argue and assure them that there was no need to bother for his sake.

“Maddox already put your luggage in his room. That’s where you’re going to sleep tonight,” Florence continued.

Any words he wanted to say died on his lips. This was definitely more than he had hoped for, but wasn’t he an ingrate for taking advantage of their hospitality when his plans were...

His plans were nothing. His eyes fell on Maddox who rushed into the room, his face all smiles. “Are you going home for Christmas?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“But you can go tomorrow, right? Give them a call,” Maddox said in the same tone as his mom, the one that made any protests futile.

“I will, of course. Thank you so much, Florence,” he said dutifully.

Somehow, the news of his appearance on the doorstep of the Kingsley household seemed to have traveled fast, because the room suddenly filled with people.

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Everyone wanted a piece of Jonathan, Maddox thought with envy, as his siblings took turns asking his boyfriend a myriad of questions while plying him with food. Jonathan was his usual polite self, but Maddox could sense something else, a warmth that wasn’t displayed for just anyone. It looked like Jonathan took to his family like a duck to water, which had to be the biggest sign that things were good between them.

When he had learned from Ray that Jonathan was gone, he had felt a bout of helplessness for a moment. Sure thing, he could wait until the winter break was over, but it wasn't going to be easy to deal with the disappointment and slight desperation he was going through.

His brothers were very much interested in the types of Irish whiskey Jonathan had tried in his life, particularly the most expensive ones, while his sisters were busy practically eating out of his palm. Sure thing, the female side of the family was more interested in their relationship, something that made Jonathan blush and become flustered now and then.

He checked his phone for the time. Why did it have to move so slowly when he needed it to be evening already so that they could go to sleep? He hadn't expected his mom to be so forthcoming, so evening meant that he would have Jonathan in his room, and, of course, his bed.

Sophia was the only one who wanted to pick a bone. "So, how are things with your parents?" she asked.

Maddox made a silent gesture for her to cut it out, but it looked like she was out for blood, because she ignored him.

"I haven't told them yet that I'm coming," Jonathan replied. "But I want to spend this Christmas with them."

"What made you fall out with them?" Sophia insisted.

Jonathan seemed uncomfortable, so Maddox decided to intervene. "Are you with the FBI, So-so?" He chose the nickname Al gave their sister to annoy her.

Sophia narrowed her eyes at him. "No, but I want to know the man who's bent on stealing my baby brother."

"I'm not a baby anymore," Maddox moaned. Sophia had a streak of overprotectiveness in her, and he had been at the end of that one too many times in the past. Marcus had to be a saint indeed to put up with her.

"I am not going to steal your brother," Jonathan said.

"You're not?" Al asked, without hiding her shock. "But that's the whole point!"

Jonathan seemed uncertain as to what the whole point was supposed to be.

"Maddox is totally smitten with you," Mary, the oldest sister, intervened.

Jonathan moved his eyes between the women, like a little rabbit caught in a trap. "Um, I... know. I mean, same here." He ended up looking at his plate.

Maddox wanted to get rid of certain sisters right now. He stared until he caught his mom's eyes. She didn't need a dictionary to understand what the deal was. "Girls, you're scaring our guest. You're just short of asking him when he and Maddox are going to get married."

Oh, no. His mom was in on it, too.

"How about we let them get to know each other a little bit before that?" his dad intervened.

Maddox beamed at him. His dad winked.

"All this food has made me sleepy," Vern said out loud and threw Maddox a conspiratorial look. "How about we call it a night? And the kids need their rest, too."

Maddox recognized a good strategy when he saw one. If any of the adults mentioned the kids, it meant that everyone else had to tone down the excitement so that they could get some sleep. He muttered a silent 'thank you' to his older brother and then waited patiently until everyone began to get up, grabbing dishes and utensils and heading for the kitchen, while exchanging hushed opinions. He knew exactly who was being put through the wringer.

Jonathan said thank you for the food and stood up. When he tried to pick up his plate, Maddox's mom intervened promptly. "No need for that. You're our guest. When do you plan on leaving tomorrow?"

"As early as possible," Jonathan replied. "And I must apologize again for dropping by unannounced."

"We were waiting for you, so no harm done. And you can see that I run a full house. One more guest is nothing to me. This household has seen a lot worse," she explained with a big smile.

Maddox jumped to his feet, hoping that he wasn't too obvious in his trying to stave off his mom's attempts to embarrass Jonathan even more. "I'm beat," he said out loud, feigning a yawn. "Do I get out of dish washing duty?"

"Mary's on it already. I put new sheets and an extra pillow in your room. Make sure Jonathan's comfortable."

She really didn't need to tell him that. Maddox took Jonathan's hand and forced him to follow before he became ensnared by who knew which of his mom's machinations.

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Jonathan felt slightly dizzy. He certainly hadn't expected the warm welcome he'd just received. He felt slightly panicked at not being able to remember everyone's names, especially the kids who had been impossible to make stay put at dinner and had mostly run around the table, causing a ruckus that no one except their grandfather seemed to care about.

He followed Maddox into a cozy bedroom that looked like it was still inhabited by a teenager with many hobbies by the posters on the walls and the various collectibles arranged neatly on the shelves. “I hadn’t quite pegged you as a nerd,” he said with a smile as he looked at the figurines without touching them.

Maddox was busy making the bed and fluffing the pillows. The sight of that bed was enough to make Jonathan gulp. His plans were clearly down the drain. Maybe it had been a mistake to come here... but he couldn’t convince himself of that at all.

“Did you just call me a nerd?” Maddox asked with a snort. “Now,” he said and put his hands on his hips, “why did you leave so early without saying anything? And if you didn’t go to your folks, where have you been staying for the last several days?”

He could go ahead and tell him everything, about Xpress, the blackmail, the mere fact that he couldn’t face the same hazing once more. But it would ruin the mood, he thought, and by how Maddox was slightly moving his hips, the mood was already set.

So, he smiled and leaned against the door. “I’m a man with means. Scholarship, work-study, all that. Plus, I still have my sapphire card.”

Maddox guffawed at that like he had just heard the best joke ever. Jonathan blinked a couple of times. Could it be that Maddox was nervous? That made two of them.

“Would you like to come to bed?”

It was an innocent question, but Jonathan didn’t believe in such things when it came to Maddox. He didn’t move as Maddox walked over to him and hovered close. There was suddenly not enough air in the room to fill his lungs. From up close, Maddox still looked as pretty as he remembered.

Jonathan cleared his throat. “I have so many things I need to tell you.”

Maddox leaned closer and pressed one thigh between his legs. Jonathan let out a small surprised sound, but it was swallowed from his lips by a hot mouth.

“Anything that can’t wait?” Maddox asked.

Jonathan shook his head. He was weak in the knees already.

“You know,” Maddox teased his ear, while his strong thigh moved so that Jonathan’s crotch was caught in the crossfire, “I was this close to sending you mournful love songs just so you would understand how you made me feel by keeping me away.”

Jonathan shivered. Maddox's hot breath on the side of his neck did nothing to calm his nerves. "You're not the kind to listen to mournful love songs. The whole thing would have been a little trite."

"Maybe you don't know everything about me."

"Maybe."

To his surprise, Maddox pushed himself away from him and then took out his phone. Jonathan stared at him, not understanding. He blinked when a pleasant harmony filled the room. "It's an old song," he remarked. Maybe mournful wasn't the right word to describe it, but it was a love song.

"I know some of those, surprisingly," Maddox said and smiled.

Jonathan wondered if it was possible to survive if you turned into a puddle on the floor.

"That's how I've felt since I met you," Maddox added and bit his bottom lip suggestively.

"Really?" Jonathan tried to put off the inevitable by playing it cool, but his voice was hoarse, his heart threatened to jump out of his chest, and his palms were sweaty. Under other circumstances, all of that would have felt like a nightmare. But this was no nightmare; it was paradise.

"Do you want me to say it?" Maddox moved closer again and whispered the words of the song into his ear, deftly replacing the word 'woman' with 'man' in the lyrics. "Take responsibility," he said while wrapping his arms around Jonathan, "because I can't escape."

Jonathan aimed his head so that he could kiss away that last word from Maddox's mouth. He couldn't escape, either.

## *Chapter Forty – In Love With A Time Traveler*

Maddox's lips on his were maddeningly sweet. How could he stay away from this? The memories would never be enough. The last chords of the song died down, and only then Maddox pulled away from him. "Have I ever told you how beautiful you are?"

Jonathan rolled his eyes in an effort to regain some self-control. "You're the one who's beautiful, and, by the way, romantic songs and all, that's a bit--"

"True. It's true."

Would Maddox think the same once he was covered in shame once more? It wasn't only because of that, but also because of how he had reacted to it all, how he couldn't cope with it and how he brought all the complications that came with someone who only thought of how to hide away from the world only so that he stopped hurting.

It was too much to expect Maddox to know and understand, no matter how much of an amazing person he was. He wouldn't force his damaged fragile self upon him like that. But he could do something. He could make some new memories and leave the door ajar.

"You're thinking," Maddox pointed out and pushed Jonathan's hair away from his forehead so that they could stare into each other's eyes. "You're thinking of something you don't know whether you should tell me or not."

He looked away.

"It's all right," Maddox said softly and cupped his cheek. "Things have been kind of rocky between us lately. I can wait for you to trust me again, I promise."

Such keen words coming from such a keen person. Jonathan felt that he could never get enough as he reached for Maddox and pulled him into his arms. If he swallowed him whole, it wouldn't be enough. His hands searched for warm skin to touch.

Maddox laughed at his desperate attempts to get under his t-shirt and pushed him away playfully, but only so that he could pull his t-shirt over his head and chuck it on the floor. The way he moved was killing Jonathan inside. Were men supposed to be this graceful? Maddox moved with a fluidity that belied the fact his body was packed with hard muscles everywhere.

The smile on his face only served to hurt Jonathan more. He closed the distance between them, hungry for Maddox, and for the illusion that everything was fine granted by merely closing his eyes.

"Someone's horny," Maddox drawled and chuckled.

“Your fault,” Jonathan replied and let his hands roam over Maddox’s beautiful chest. His fingers curled around the manly hair and tugged, making Maddox hiss.

“Well, as much as I enjoy watching you simp over me, I’d rather take this to the bed.”

Jonathan didn’t have time to protest as Maddox grabbed his waist, kissed him short and wild and with a lot of tongue. The next thing he knew he was on his back on the bed and Maddox was on top of him, busily devouring his lips, especially the bottom one.

“Oh God,” he whispered.

Maddox chuckled against his open mouth. “Not the big guy, I’m afraid. But I appreciate the thought.”

Jonathan took hold of Maddox’s messy hair so that he could stare at his pretty face again. “I love you, you know that?”

“Feel free to tell me that to my face a couple of times, you know, just so that I understand. Spell it out for me, ‘cause I’m a bit thick-headed.”

Jonathan snorted. “No, you just like making fun of me.”

“Hey,” Maddox called gently while hovering over him. “It’s nice hearing you say it. I mean, the note was nice, too, but some things--”

“Some things need to be said in person, right?” Jonathan stole the words from Maddox’s lips. If only he weren’t such a big coward. But, as he lay there, completely unable to resist Maddox’s sensual attack, he understood that for anything to work, he needed to do it his way. It was self-preservation and nothing more. But Maddox deserved the truth.

He brushed his thumb across Maddox’s mouth and was rewarded with a hooded look. Maddox pushed out his tongue and caressed his thumb; Jonathan shivered at the velvety sensation. It was enough to earn a mischievous glint in the adorable grey eyes. His thumb was sucked gently into a wet warm cavern, and that simple thing was enough to make him moan in desire.

“I want more,” he declared and wrapped one arm around Maddox’s neck, while using his free hand to play with the hair on the other’s chest. “I want all of you.”

“Happy to oblige,” Maddox said courteously. “The only problem is... you’re overdressed, my man.”

Jonathan laughed softly and tried to get out of his sweater. From that position, his attempts to do so were completely thwarted, there was no other choice for him than to drop back on the bed with a groan. Maddox drew a long wet line across his jawline, while his hands snuck under the sweater and struggled with the buttons of his shirt.

“We’re going about this the wrong way, you know?” Jonathan felt compelled to point out. “I cannot undress as long as you keep me prisoner under you, and you want me out of my shirt before I’m out of my sweater.”

“It’s very difficult to keep my head on my shoulders when I have you under me like this. Hence this whole confusion,” Maddox said brightly.

Jonathan didn’t believe a word of it, but it was all in good fun. While they were both laughing, Maddox managed to pull his sweater over his head and then unbuttoned the dress shirt. From there, it was easy to reach under his undershirt and tease his nipples. Jonathan grunted at the direct attack.

“Ah, don’t tell me you’re a cry baby,” Maddox scolded him playfully. “You’ve been ripping out my chest hair for like the last ten minutes.”

“Sorry,” Jonathan said quickly. “I wasn’t aware I was doing that.” He pulled his hand away, as it seemed as if he couldn’t keep it very far from Maddox’s sexy chest if it killed him.

“No worries. As long as I’m yours again, you can rip all the hair from my body.”

“I wouldn’t do that. You’re too sexy like this,” Jonathan whispered.

Maddox offered him a lopsided grin. “Yeah, I’ve noticed that you get kind of wild when you see me naked.”

“Full of yourself much?” Jonathan sputtered in feigned outrage.

“So will you be soon,” Maddox responded with a broad grin.

It took a while for Jonathan’s addled brain, which was already soaking in a few too many endorphins, to understand what Maddox meant by that. There was no room left for interpretation as Maddox appeared to be suddenly more adept at getting him out of his pants and underwear.

Soon enough, they were in a compromising position, Maddox between his legs, Jonathan completely naked, and both panting slightly in anticipation. Maddox let his hungry eyes roam over Jonathan’s body. “I told you. You’re beautiful.”

He’d hang on to those words for later; he would remember them when everything was blown to pieces. He pulled Maddox closer for a kiss. This night, he wanted it all, so he let go of Maddox’s sweet lips and tongue, only so that he could lick his chin and then his throat. While his range of motion was still limited, he could dip his tongue into the crook of a strong shoulder and lick the fresh clean sweat gathered there.

Maddox pushed him back on the bed and laughed. Then, he reached for his belt and Jonathan's mouth went dry even before that magnificent cock sprang out in front of him. The sight alone was drool worthy.

Maddox grabbed his cock and swung it from side to side. "Missed me, Jonathan?"

"Don't be an ass," Jonathan protested, but it wasn't like he could deny the truth. He grabbed Maddox's cock out of his hand and tried to pull it to his mouth.

Again, he was at the receiving end of more teasing, because Maddox just pushed him away and then jumped out of bed. Jonathan rolled on one side, yearning to follow Maddox with his eyes, if there was no other way for him to follow.

Maddox pushed down his jeans and got rid of his underwear and socks. Then, he stood completely naked in front of him.

"Are you going to tease me with more cock puppetry?" Jonathan asked and cocked his head so that he could admire the entire beautiful man that was Maddox.

"Nah, I think I'll save that for birthday parties," Maddox replied.

Jonathan gasped in mock shock. "What kind of an exhibitionist are you?"

Maddox rolled his eyes. "I'm only talking about your birthday parties. You know, private parties, just between you and me."

"Oh, all right. I suppose that's something I can live with."

Maddox smirked and walked closer to the bed. Now, his cock was level with Jonathan's cheek, but Jonathan decided that two could play that game. "Well?" he asked. "Isn't Mr. Cock going to ask me nicely to take him in my mouth?"

A burst of laughter let him know his joke had landed. "Just suck me off, babe, before I lose my erection since you're bent on making me laugh."

"Like I would be so gullible as to believe such a thing possible." Jonathan didn't allow Maddox to utter any more words, he deftly caught the throbbing thing and wrapped his lips around its girth.

Maddox let out a groan of pleasure and ran his fingers through Jonathan's hair. "I'm going to be selfish tonight," he whispered. "I just want all of me in you. But I'll reciprocate later, and it's a promise."

They both wanted the same thing. Jonathan didn't let go of the delicious cock to agree, but decided that words were overrated, anyhow, when actions could talk so much louder. He adjusted his position by sitting on the edge of the bed, doing that without ever letting go of

Maddox's manhood. Then, he began to apply himself with the enthusiasm and hunger he always felt when in the same room with this gorgeous man.

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Oh, yes, Jonathan's mouth on his shaft was pure heaven, and after so many days without doing as much as touch his cock for more than ten seconds, he felt like he was about to burst. Still, he wasn't going to blow too early, because he didn't want to be a disappointment to his handsome boyfriend.

He put one hand under Jonathan's chin and cupped the back of his head with the other so that he could have a bit of control. If he let Jonathan go for it, he would be a complete goner in a matter of minutes.

It looked like his lover appreciated being taken in hand like that because he moaned prettily around his cock. That allowed Maddox to pull him completely away and enjoy the sight of parted wet lips and the look of complete abandonment in Jonathan's eyes. Fuck, he was beautiful, and smart, and gorgeous, and awesome... and he'd learn everything about that.

He made Jonathan turn face down on the bed and then helped him raise up on all fours. His hand moved between the firm buttocks with intent, letting one finger move closer now and then. It didn't take much to make Jonathan pant in desire to be fucked. "Wait just a moment."

Since he had gotten a boyfriend, he had learned a thing or two. That meant that he was well prepared for what he intended to do to Jonathan, which basically meant to wreck him in the most pleasurable way possible. His hands trembled slightly as he pushed inside the scorching heat, opening it slowly and getting it ready for much bigger things. He had never ached for someone in this overwhelming manner before. Sure, he was just as horny as the next guy on a regular basis, but this thing with Jonathan was simply off the charts.

"Ready for me?" he whispered and draped his body over the slender one under him.

"Always," Jonathan whispered back.

Maddox made his boyfriend turn his head for another kiss. Too bad that it meant holding Jonathan in an uncomfortable position so he could fuck him and kiss him at the same time. It was with reluctance that he let go of the perfect tasty mouth.

"You look so sexy from behind," he said and smacked both palms on Jonathan's perfect ass. He took in the broad shoulders tapering down to the graceful waist, only to give way for that awesome butt.

"I thought you preferred to look me in the eyes," Jonathan replied, but his voice was strained, which meant that the anticipation was getting to him, too.

“I like you from all angles,” Maddox assured him. “But, you see, you kind of drove me nuts this week, so I want you more submissive just so that I know you won’t run away again.”

“I doubt that I have the strength for such a feat.” Jonathan’s breathless voice was music to his ears.

He smirked and moved his cock closer to the enticing little hole. Just the thought of that tight heat, of how the muscled channel was capable of giving his cock the ride of a lifetime hiked his horniness. Like he needed that right now. He grabbed his shaft by the root and squeezed tightly to take the edge off. It would be a total bummer if he ended up shooting all over Jonathan’s hole and butt cheeks before he even managed to put it in.

Slowly inhaling and exhaling, he moved closer. Then he moaned and closed his eyes as the head began delving inside the well lubed ass, and the anticipation was brought to an end. He moved slowly, listening closely for any sign of distress coming from Jonathan. If they were extra careful in the beginning, they could go for a wild ride later. With that self-promise in mind, he pushed deeper, but without changing the pace.

“All good?” he asked.

“Mind blowing,” Jonathan confirmed. “But would you move already? I might pass out from too much waiting.”

“Your ass is uber tight,” Maddox replied. “And I don’t want to wreck it by going too fast.”

“Maybe I want you to wreck me a little.”

“Just a little? Don’t provoke me, babe. I might just lose my head.”

“Such a smooth talker,” Jonathan teased him. “But maybe you want to put your money where your mouth is.”

“Nah,” Maddox teased back and wrapped one arm around Jonathan’s chest. He kissed his boyfriend’s cheek loudly. “But I’ll put my mouth all over you, and that’s a promise.”

The welcoming wetness and warmth were too much to ignore. With a small strained cry, he pushed inside all the way.

“Fuck me, Maddox, please,” Jonathan begged when he didn’t move for several seconds, too overwhelmed by having his entire cock buried deep where it belonged.

“Will do, babe, will do. Just give me a sec here.” Jonathan made the mistake of clenching his butt. Maddox growled and bit his ear. “Are you looking for a hard fuck?”

“You have no idea what talking dirty to me like that does.”

“Right. Why don’t you describe it to me?”

Jonathan chuckled, but Maddox bit his ear harder until he heard the other hiss.

“It’s just amazing, Maddox. Nobody else will ever fuck me like this.”

“You can bet your sweet tight ass,” Maddox confirmed and moved only slightly so that he could ram back in.

Jonathan dipped his head down in surrender, and that was all Maddox needed. He straightened up so that he could grab the sexy ass opened in front of him and admire the flexing and squeezing in all the back muscles with each thrust he made.

The way they moved together was enough to confirm that they were made for each other. At times, Jonathan just delayed the movement only so that he could slam against him, driving him up the wall with pleasure.

“Oh, Maddox,” Jonathan moaned. “It’s... I’m...”

“Coming already?” Maddox decided it was a good moment to tease his boyfriend. “But I’m not even touching your cock.”

It was a badge of honor to make Jonathan come from his ass after their time spent apart. Sure, if it didn’t happen, he would be quick to take matters into his hands. But it looked like there was no need for that.

“You don’t have to,” Jonathan said as his breathing became erratic. “It’s so good, Maddox, please, more.”

“Sure thing, babe.” He used the endearment with the intention of riling Jonathan up a bit, but it looked like his boyfriend actually enjoyed being called that, or he was just too horny and far gone to care. Either way, it gave Maddox free reign to use it, and that was just another perk of having a boyfriend. You had someone to smooch and cuddle with and fuck, of course, and call whatever you wanted.

He moved faster and faster, making Jonathan moan louder and cry out. Maddox didn’t need a compass and a map to realize that the rhythmic pulses surrounding his cock and squeezing it for dear life were a dead giveaway as to what was happening.

“Here comes the cream, babe,” Maddox announced himself, trying to pull one last joke before he lost all ability to speak another word.

Jonathan seemed in no shape to reply, so Maddox just used the pliant body under him to bring himself to completion. When he came, his strangled cries seemed to go on forever, just as his cock, apparently tapped into some endless reserve, shot deep inside Jonathan, spurt after spurt.

“That was so awesome,” he moaned and let himself fall on the bed, by Jonathan’s side, what felt like a long time after. “Can you tell me what we were fighting about before? No, better yet, don’t tell me ‘cause I don’t care.”

Instead of saying anything in response, Jonathan just threw one arm over him and rested his forehead against Maddox’s shoulder. Good, that meant that he was forgiven, and that Jonathan no longer cared about him being a complete ass.

“You know,” he said while wrapping his arm around Jonathan to pull him closer, “my family is crazy about you. Just like me.”

“That’s good to hear,” Jonathan murmured.

“Seriously, I’m so happy that we cleared the air. I’m this close to not letting you go to see your folks and keeping you here for Christmas.”

“I need to bury the hatchet with them,” Jonathan replied.

“I know. It’s just that I missed you like, whatever, you know what I mean.”

“I do.”

So, they were on the same page, finally. Maddox felt his body growing heavy and his eyelids followed suit.

“Hey, don’t fall asleep without washing,” Jonathan chided him. “Go first.”

“We could go together,” Maddox suggested.

“We’re not at Sunny Hill. I really, really don’t want us to scandalize your family. Oh, damn, were we loud? I can’t remember. How loud were we?”

“Chill, babe,” Maddox said and kissed his forehead. “This house has awesome soundproofing.” He had no idea if that was the truth, but he needed to tell Jonathan something to put his mind at ease.

“This ‘babe’ thing,” Jonathan started.

“Yeah?”

“I think it’s growing on me.”

Maddox laughed and pushed Jonathan’s hand lower. “Look at what else is growing on you.”

Jonathan pulled his hand away and then pinched the closest nipple hard.

“Ouch,” Maddox protested. “It’s not my fault you’re making me horny twenty-four-seven.”

“Yeah, sure, blame it all on me.”

They laughed together and then they lay like that, in pleasant silence, for a bit.

“Jonathan,” Maddox began, “we’re going to talk, right? About everything.”

“Eventually.”

“Don’t be a tease.”

Seriously, he had to be joking.

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Maddox woke up quite early after the night’s activities, so it took him a bit for his eyes to adjust to the early light filtering through the curtains. He reached for the place by his side and found no one. Jonathan must be downstairs already, but why hadn’t he woken him up?

He was about to push himself up when his hand brushed against something. He turned on his side and blinked a few times as he saw the envelope. Jonathan really liked writing notes by hand, didn’t he?

He sat on the edge of the bed and opened the envelope. A few sheets of paper covered in neat writing were inside. Maddox felt his good spirits rise as he looked at the first phrases. Impatience made him jump to his feet, and his eyes moved fast over each page, until almost the end. He’d read every word later, but he needed to catch Jonathan first before he left.

He clenched his teeth when his eyes fell on the last page that appeared to have been written later than the rest, if he took into account the more distressed calligraphy, something unusual for someone as cool and collected as Jonathan.

*This long letter was supposed to be about why and how much I love you. But recent events force me to turn this into a goodbye of sorts.*

*When winter break ends, I won’t be returning to Sunny Hill. The past has finally caught up with me, and it’s not my wish to drag you into the drama that tends to be my life. However, I want you to hear everything from me, before I become, once more, the butt of jokes for every living soul around.*

*The reason why I left early without seeing you after finals was because I received a peculiar message. People working for Xpress are blackmailing me by threatening to release a questionable video Drew took of us in what you can imagine as being a compromising position.*

Maddox rolled his eyes and grimaced. Jonathan needed to update that fucking software that made him tick already. He sounded like he was from a different era. It was like being in love with a time traveler. He read further, and his anger boiled.

*They threatened that they would release the video if I didn't choose to leave Sunny Hill behind. I suppose that you're getting mad at me right now, because that means I'm also leaving you behind.*

*Call me a coward, Maddox, but I don't want to take advantage of your feelings for me. At first, you would want to stick with me, and I appreciate that, I really do. But that kind of thing, the constant mockery, the sneers, the gossip, it tends to take a toll on people. I speak from experience.*

*I have no doubt that they will release the video anyway. That is why I don't want you to be exposed to something that you cannot prepare for. I'll send the video to you – yes, it appears that a bit of experience with using search engines helps, and it wasn't so hard after all for someone to stumble upon it at one point or another – and you are free to judge me as you see fit.*

*You told me repeatedly that I have the bad habit of running away. I'm only half-running away now, and it's your fault. Watch the video and decide for yourself if you ever want to see me again or not. And don't rush to catch me, because by the time you get that video, there will be many miles between us already.*

*I'm leaving you my address below. If you would ever like to pay me a visit, you'd make me happy... but that's not the point. Come only if that's what you really want, not because of obligation or pity. If you don't come, I'll understand. And even so, just know that, at this moment, you mean the world to me, and you'll always have a place in my heart.*

*There you have it. Jonathan Hamilton, pathetically romantic, writing you seven pages of I love yous in different ways.*

*So, there's no harm in adding one more.*

*I love you, Maddox Kingsley.*

*PS. If this letter somehow ends up in Xpress, don't ever let me know. There's only so much cringe I can subject myself to.*

Cringe? Where the hell did Jonathan see anything like that? Clearly he had to be a visitor from two centuries ago, because he didn't know the first thing about the definition of cringe. Maddox jumped to his feet and crumpled the papers in his fist. He was caught between two very different, quite opposing, feelings. One was of absolute happiness, because, hell, who wrote seven pages of I love yous in this day and age, and using pen and paper on top of it all?

The other was of scorching hot anger. For real, he was starting to see red in front of his eyes. How dared those assholes blackmail Jonathan like that? Sure, Jonathan was wrong to believe that Maddox would care about the gossip, as he had learned that lesson painfully, but it wasn't his place to decide for Jonathan, too.

There had to be a way. Dammit, he wasn't going to let Jonathan drop out of Sunny Hill just because of some scumbags with no lives. Xpress had just gotten themselves a real enemy.

He pushed against his forehead, trying to force a bit of order into his thoughts. First, he needed to go downstairs and see if Jonathan was still around. But just as he was about to grab some clothes so that he didn't end up shocking an early riser other than his boyfriend, his phone chimed to announce that he had a new message.

Annoyed, he grabbed it, and then he stopped his frantic search for clothes. He sat back on the bed and opened the video. Jonathan had to be far away already.

The Jonathan from the video didn't look that much different from the Jonathan he knew, but Maddox was well aware that he was staring at a different version of his boyfriend. The wariness was not there in the beautiful amber eyes, and he even looked slightly arrogant, but in a very sexy, very hot way.

He was looking out a window and had his shirt open in the front. For some reason, he looked pissed.

*What crawled up your ass?*

Maddox winced at the stranger's voice, obviously belonging to the guy taking the video. So that had to be the infamous Drew. He was more than ready to hate the dude even more, with his phony accent, and low fake manly voice. Yeah, he sounded like a total douche.

On the screen, Jonathan threw an annoyed look at the speaker.

*Put the phone down already, Drew. You're not being cute right now.*

Drew laughed and Maddox made a face when a naked cock sprang into view, obscuring Jonathan's silhouette and blurring it out for a moment.

*Look what I have for you here. All pumped up and ready. Come on, you know you always feel better after you suck me off.*

What a fucking asshole. And his cock was weird, Maddox decided. Who liked that kind of ribbed thing? It looked like a freaking dildo.

Jonathan appeared determined to ignore the blatant invitation and continued to look out the window. As the camera moved, it seemed that Drew had gotten up from the bed and was now moving closer to his target.

*Look, here are my two favorite things in the whole world.*

Gosh, how he hated this dude. He sounded like such a major prick.

The camera shifted, and Maddox's eyebrows shot up at the sight of the white powder. Drew seemed quite adept at drawing lines with a credit card, while still holding his phone. A few blond strands came into view for a moment, and the sound of someone inhaling deeply through his nose could be heard.

*You should quit.* Jonathan's stern voice could be heard. *One day, you'll get into trouble over it. Is it really worth it?*

*You should quit busting my balls. Fuck, this shit's so good. Come on, give me a kiss.*

Jonathan didn't look like he cared about what Drew wanted as the phone moved closer to his face.

*You've never tried it, that's why you're like this. But you know, if you give me some of that thing you know I love to bits, I might just consider quitting.*

*Do you want me to suck your cock? Is it because that's the only thing you want from me?*

*Don't be like this, Jonathan. You're the other favorite thing of mine, in case you were asking yourself.*

Jonathan rolled his eyes. Drew kissed his cheek and then cupped his jaw.

Maddox had to stop himself from crushing the phone in his hand. The camera moved wildly, but it was hard to look at how the fucker was kissing Jonathan, anyway. Of Drew, he could only see a square jaw and strands of blond hair, but it still annoyed Maddox to no end just to notice those details. Good thing he wasn't a blond; he would have had to dye his hair.

In the video, Jonathan seemed to relent as Drew moved his mouth to cover his. Jonathan's eyes flicked open, and Maddox could read pure abandonment in them.

*I dreamed about you last night, you know?* Drew continued to talk.

*Were we doing this together?* Jonathan still wanted to keep his anger in, but his voice was dropping low as he pointed out of view, probably at the white powder on the table.

Drew caressed his face. *No, but you were sucking me off.*

*Oh, screw you already.*

*Not so fast. You're good at sucking cock, Jonathan. It's not like there's any shame in that.*

*I guess there is, because I don't see you doing it.*

*I'm not good at it. But you are. And look at you.*

Drew moved the phone to Jonathan's crotch.

Yeah, true enough, he was pitching a tent.

Drew then used his free hand to feel the bulge and squeezed hard. *I'll make you come, too. Don't be a wuss.*

More kissing followed. Maddox felt an urgent need to skip, but Jonathan had asked him to watch it, and that was what he was going to do.

Drew continued to coax Jonathan into getting on his knees.

*Could you at least stop filming?* Jonathan asked as he finally knelt in front of Drew and was reaching for his crotch.

*No. It's just for me, don't worry. I need something to jerk off to, you know. I'll be home all of next week.*

*Can't you just watch some porn like everyone else?*

Drew moved his hand through Jonathan's hair and caressed his cheek. His fingers rested on Jonathan's mouth and his thumb snuck inside to make it open. *Porn has nothing on you and what you can do with that mouth. Come on, show me your tongue.*

Jonathan seemed to hesitate a little, but Drew was whispering small praises.

The part that Maddox hated the most was not Drew's asshole behavior. No, it was how much in love Jonathan looked. And he seemed so innocent there, like someone who had never been betrayed before. For anyone who cared to look closely, it was evident that he was fighting to not let himself be manipulated. Still, it was clear which part of him was winning.

Maddox almost bit through his lower lip in frustration as Jonathan wrapped his lips gently around Drew's cock.

*Oh, yes, like that. You really know how to blow a guy's mind, Jonathan. I'd totally quit if you gave me blowjobs like this every day.*

At least, the fucker didn't look like he had staying power. It didn't take him long to blow his load.

*Now look at me and show me. Fuck yeah.* Drew moved one finger inside Jonathan's mouth, playing with his own cum.

What a fucking disgusting pig, Maddox thought.

*You had your fun. Now it's your turn.*

*Nah, no way. I'm not sucking dick, I told you. I'll give you a hand, though.*

The video ended there. Maddox pushed the back of his hand against his forehead, and only then realized that he had really crumpled Jonathan's love letter. He threw the phone on the bed and took the sheets of paper to his desk where he began to smooth them out, one by one. All this time, his mind was in overdrive.

From his point of view, the video was not as racy as Jonathan had painted it, but nonetheless, he hated that there were people, strangers, who had looked at his boyfriend doing those things and could still look.

The part with the drugs was the aggravating circumstance, and that was all on Drew. Sure enough, there was no evidence that Jonathan had gotten into drugs himself; quite the opposite. And yet, it still looked like Jonathan had been the one to get crucified for the whole thing.

He placed the love letter inside a book and then linked his hands together, resting his chin on top of them. He needed to think, think, think. No way in hell was he letting Xpress get the better of Jonathan like that. Sunny Hill wasn't some stuffy old school with moldy professors and mean students. And an asshole like Drew.

Well, thinking could wait. Now, he needed to do just one thing, and he'd see how to proceed from there. Without a second thought, he put on a t-shirt and a pair of sweatpants and was out the door.

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It felt so strange to walk through the front door, and unannounced on top of it all. A part of him, the one that had gotten a bit cynical lately, wanted to put his parents in a position where they just couldn't send him away from their doorstep.

The butler, Mr. Simmons, walked down the stairs so quickly that Jonathan feared that he might end up tumbling down. "Jonathan," he said breathlessly, "you're back."

Mr. Simmons had been with his family for as long as he could remember, and Jonathan was as fond of the old man as the butler was of him. He had always been the one to sneak him candy when he wasn't supposed to have even one more, and the one who helped him with his homework after the tutors were gone, and most of all, the person who made that house feel like a home in ways that his parents didn't appear to be able to.

"Why didn't you call?"

"I suppose it won't make this family go bankrupt if you add an extra plate to the table."

Mr. Simmons gasped and then smiled. "Did you just make a joke? I suppose that place has been kind to you so far."

Jonathan didn't doubt that Mr. Simmons had eavesdropped enough to know where he had been all this time. He intended to surprise the old butler even more because he dropped his luggage, walked over to him, and gave him a hug. It took Mr. Simmons a few good moments to hug him back, and when he did, it was more like a pat on the back, but one that Jonathan knew was loaded with affection.

"Well, where is everyone? The prodigal son has returned, so we should have a feast, right?"

Mr. Simmons seemed to have some trouble recovering from that hug. "Well, of course. You're staying for Christmas, right? Have you made plans for New Year's celebrations? Your parents would be happy to have you over."

"I'm here to stay," Jonathan explained shortly.

"Really? That's great news." Mr. Simmons searched his face for a moment. "Isn't it?"

Jonathan sighed. "It's a long story."

"I was about to make tea, anyway," Mr. Simmons replied.

"I'm afraid it's not the kind of story meant for respectable ears."

"We might have different definitions of what respectable means. Talking of respectable or the opposite of that, your parents have visitors."

Mr. Simmons barely had time to finish speaking. Jonathan sensed that there was someone at the top of the stairs and he lifted his eyes. "You must be fucking kidding me," he let out without censoring.

Drew rolled his eyes and began walking down the stairs with his studied, devil-may-care, gait. "Nice to see you, too, Jonathan. Simmons, how about I take Jonathan's luggage and you can see to more important things?"

Jonathan nodded at the butler who kept his back to Drew, ignoring him on purpose. While Drew moved closer, he had time to examine his former friend. Well, he definitely didn't look like he was high, but it was still early in the day.

At a glance, Drew looked like the same confident, attractive, young man that had made Jonathan lose his head in the past. But now, Jonathan noticed other things, like the cruel lips curled in a smile, the aggressive masculinity Drew exuded, the firm way he walked as if he ruled the world. Before, he had used to think that was everything he wanted in a man. Not anymore. Maddox looked a bit rough compared to Drew, but his smile was warm, and his masculinity didn't come from a place of brutal desires. No, he was like a giant cat, minus the bloodthirst, and he was such a marshmallow inside that the thought alone made Jonathan's mouth water.

The expression on his face must have changed, because Drew quirked an eyebrow and smirked. Jonathan grabbed his luggage and walked toward the stairs. When Drew moved as if to take his luggage from him, he pushed his shoulder against the other's. "I can manage, thank you."

"Come on, Jonathan, it's the least I can do for you," Drew drawled and followed him up the stairs.

"The least you can do for me is to admit to being an asshole. Or maybe go back in time and not make that video? Oh, I suppose between the two, time traveling is the most doable in your case."

"I apologized to your parents. And now, I want to apologize to you as well."

"I heard you. Now, can you please stop following me? This is still my home, and I know the way to my room."

Drew put a hand on his shoulder to stop him once they reached the landing. Jonathan growled on impulse, and Drew pulled his hand away. "What kind of school did you go to? One with wrestling midgets?"

"A normal school. Where people aren't douchebags like here," he said pointedly.

"No shit," Drew said with a snort. "I heard what you told Simmons. You came back home to stay."

"Well, my reasons are my business," Jonathan said through his teeth. Finally, he had reached his room. "And this is my bedroom, where you're not allowed."

There was some satisfaction in slamming the door in Drew's face. Yeah, that felt good. Still, he needed to face his parents, and he wasn't much in the mood for that.

He threw himself on the bed, face down. He could still feel Maddox's strong lovemaking from the night before. And he could use a nap.

*Chapter Forty-One – Good Guys Do Date Bad Boys, After All*

Maddox rushed into the kitchen just as his mom was starting to prepare breakfast.

“What’s with you up so early?” she asked while she busied herself with a stack of plates. “Not even your dad is up.”

“Jonathan left,” Maddox said. He felt his lips curling into a grin as he remembered the love letter.

“I know. Unlike the rest of you, I was on my feet.”

Maddox stopped for a moment and studied his mom’s face. She could barely keep in a smile.

“Wait, wait, wait, you know something I don’t.”

“What do you mean?” She continued to smirk, all too full of herself.

“He talked to you, didn’t he?”

“For a bit, yes. He didn’t want to even have a cup of tea, he was in that much of a hurry.”

“But he talked to you,” Maddox insisted. “What about?”

His mom paused for effect as she tended the stove. Then, she turned toward him with a huge smile. “Well, since you insist, he told me that he would speak to his parents about you.”

“What exactly did he mean by that? What’s he going to tell them?”

His mom gave him a look like she couldn’t believe he had come out of her with only one neuron in his big melon of a head. “Obviously, that he wants them to know you’re his boyfriend. I understood that he’ll introduce you to them. And after that, all of us.”

“Hmm,” Maddox grunted and crossed his arms, “I pity the Hamiltons, then. They’re in for the shock of their lives. But wait, Jonathan left me what sounded like a farewell note--” He stopped before talking more than he should.

“He said,” his mom said, ignoring his hesitation, “that if you ever go visit him, he wants his parents to be prepared.”

Maddox frowned and tried to make sense of that. “Prepared to meet a working-class boy like me or something?”

His mom burst into laughter. “No, he actually said that he wants them to be prepared to accept that he will never have anyone else but you. Provided, of course, that you feel the same about him. Damn, that boy is so intense. I hope he hasn’t done anything embarrassing like serenading you under your window yet.”

Maddox grinned ear to ear. No, Jonathan was not very much into public displays, but he did know how to write an awesome love letter. “Not yet, but I’m counting on it. Just joking. Mom, are you going to hate me if I go after him? I might not be able to be back for Christmas.”

That seemed to surprise his mom enough that she stopped what she was doing to look at him. “What’s burning? Can’t you see him later?”

Maddox rubbed the back of his neck and tried to choose his next words carefully. “He wrote me a seven-page letter. Like a love letter. And then told me that he wouldn’t be coming back to Sunny Hill after winter break. Ah, it’s complicated. I can’t give you all the details.”

His mom put one hand on her hip, which was a sign that she was debating whatever she wanted to say next. “How complicated? Do you risk losing him?”

Maddox knew he was being offered an easy way out, but he decided not to lie. “I don’t think so. No, I know I won’t lose him. But I think he’ll be very happy to see me. Plus, I can meet his parents,” he added with a broad smile.

His mom chuckled. “When do you want to go?”

“I’ll need a plane ticket, and if it’s today, it’ll still feel late.”

“Today? But you don’t have any clothes!”

“Really, mom? I have clothes.”

“Not the kind fit for you to meet your future in-laws.”

“Jonathan wouldn’t want me to look fake in a suit or something. He would want me to meet his parents as I am.”

“Still, that doesn’t mean that you should look like white trash.”

“I cannot believe all of the stuff that comes out of your mouth. Since when did we become white trash?”

“We’re not, but you need to be dressed nicely. At least some new clothes are necessary.” Decided, she turned off the stove and wiped her hands. “We’re going shopping right now. I’ll wake up your father so that he can see about finding a ticket for you. You know that’s going to be tough, given that Christmas is right around the corner.”

He wanted to argue with her a little, but she did have a point. Even if he didn’t want some stiff weird suit, some neat clothes wouldn’t hurt. After all, he was going to meet some people who would judge the way he looked, without a doubt.

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His parents weren't the type to go overboard with displays of affection, so he didn't expect much when he set foot in his father's study after a very satisfying nap. While it was unnatural for him to feel so relaxed about seeing his parents again, it was just how he felt right now. He had spent too much time being afraid of all kinds of things. He didn't even play any 'what-if' scenarios in his head as he knocked on the door.

His dad's morose 'come in' let him know that he must be expected.

"Jonathan," his dad said the moment he was inside the room.

Much to his surprise, his dad stood from his desk, walked around it, then toward him, and after that, he pulled him into a brief hug. Jonathan was taken aback, and then began to feel moved by that sudden reaction only after his dad had stopped hugging him for a few moments.

"I'm glad that you're home," his dad said. Jonathan couldn't help notice the lines at the corners of his eyes and the slight stoop to his shoulders. It wasn't a thing he had ever paid attention to before, but his father was getting old. "Simmons told me you were tired, so we didn't want to disturb your sleep."

"I didn't get a lot of sleep last night," Jonathan admitted. "How's mom?"

"Mad at me, but probably less so now that you're here. Let's go see her together."

There was an awkward pause between them.

"How is school?" his dad asked. "You had your finals, right?"

"Yes. It's good," Jonathan replied.

They were both bad at making small talk. It seemed like his dad didn't want to say the wrong words, so there must have been some upheaval around the house between Thanksgiving and now.

His mom was in the living room, reading a book, and she jumped to her feet once he walked in. "Jonathan!" she exclaimed, and unlike his father's, her hug lasted for a while. "You've changed a little. Have you lost weight?"

Jonathan doubted that major changes had occurred in that respect, but he decided that he couldn't reject this offer of peace. "Probably. Studying at Sunny Hill is no joke."

His mom smiled. "Do you like it there? Do they have a proper chemistry lab? We could always help. George," she said to his dad, "you know what to do."

"Mom, I don't want you to make a donation or anything. I'm just a normal student there. And I'm not going back. I might take a break altogether from my studies and figure out--"

“What happened? Why wouldn’t you go back?” she asked.

She let go of him to touch her pearls, a sign that was, in her case, one of great distress.

“It’s... well, the same thing as before is about to happen,” he said in a strained voice.

Both his parents looked at him, trying to make sense of his words.

He blushed under their scrutiny. “Somebody found that video. They’re threatening to release it for every student to see if I go back there. End of story.”

His parents remained silent. One minute or so passed before his dad spoke. “We can file a lawsuit.”

Jonathan pursed his lips. “Against who? It’s some anonymous gossip page on the internet doing this.”

“There are means to find who the people behind it are.”

Jonathan shook his head. “It wouldn’t change a thing. People would judge me anyway, and they do. It’s something I need to learn to live with, don’t you think?”

“There are always solutions, even to the direst situations,” his mom said. “The Kincaids are visiting, as you might know by now. They are more than interested in clearing things up once and for all. And Andrew--”

“Mom,” Jonathan stopped her, “I’m not interested in Drew at all. I have a boyfriend.”

“You have a boyfriend,” his mom said slowly and exchanged a glance with his dad.

“Yes. His name is Maddox Kingsley.” He took one deep breath so that he had enough air in his lungs to continue. “He’s a student at Sunny Hill, and he doesn’t come from a rich family. I’m very much in love with him.” He looked away, not wanting to see them observing him with judging eyes like before.

His dad cleared his throat. “But we thought that Andrew--”

“Andrew,” Jonathan said pointedly, “was a mistake.”

There, he had said it. If they didn’t agree, there was nothing he could do. They had to live with it, just like he had to live with everything else.

“Well, I think that his parents might be very disappointed,” his mom said.

“Why would they be? Don’t tell me you expected us to... what? Become official?” Jonathan asked, rightfully intrigued.

His dad pursed his lips. “You cannot find fault with us for trying to salvage this situation. And you and Andrew shouldn’t feel forced to hide your relationship.”

Jonathan didn’t want to shock his parents too much, but he had come this far. “Mom, dad, Drew used me. And he’s not interested in me, unless there’s something in it for him, and I don’t even want to think what that could be.”

“Well, that will make for very interesting conversation at the dinner table,” his mom murmured under her breath. “So, this boy, Maddox?”

“Yes, that is his name,” Jonathan said.

“What is he like?”

“I told you. He doesn’t come from a rich family.”

His dad snorted. “We figured as much. Your mother wants to know, just as I do, a bit more about him than that little detail.”

Little detail? Jonathan’s eyes moved from one parent to another, but they appeared to be dead serious.

“Well, he is very popular because of his good looks, but he works for his grades, and he is kind and doesn’t do drugs.” He felt so strange telling his parents all the reasons why he was in love with Maddox, but he had promised himself that he would hold nothing back. “He knows how to have a good time, but he is serious when the situation requires. And he is…”

His parents leaned forward slightly as they listened. The calm from before returned, as Jonathan continued to explain the many reasons Maddox was his boyfriend, and why someone like Drew was not.

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“This is impossible!” Maddox pushed the heels of his palms into his eyes and groaned. “Have you checked, dad? Everywhere? Even on that website, what’s it called?”

His dad rubbed his shoulder in sympathy. “Are you sure you can’t wait until after Christmas? There’s a better chance for you to find a plane ticket between Christmas and New Year’s Eve.”

Maddox munched on his bottom lip. He had even gotten the nicest clothes he had ever had. His mom had splurged without even looking at the tags. And he didn’t look like a different person in cool designer jeans and the nice sweater that, his mom said, brought out the color of his eyes like nothing else could. He was so totally prepared, and now, he couldn’t get where he needed to be? Which was, obviously, in Jonathan’s arms?

“I’ll drive there,” he said with conviction.

Both his parents stared him down.

“Maddox, it’s a long way there, and being behind the wheel for that many hours is not safe,” his dad pointed out. “I know,” he said and put one appeasing hand up when he opened his mouth, “what you’re going to tell me, that you will pay attention to the road, and that you’re going to take breaks to rest, but we’re not blind, and we can tell that you’re impatient to see your boyfriend.”

Maddox pursed his lips. He was starting to fume on the inside. How could he convince them that he would be totally calm at the wheel, when he couldn’t control himself as things were right now?

The front bell rang cheerfully, breaking the tension. His mom gave him a stern look and went to get the door. The moment Maddox heard who it was, a plan began to take shape in his mind. “Rusty!” he bellowed from the kitchen. “Come here right now!”

“Aye-aye, captain!” Rusty replied, saluting as soon as he reached the kitchen.

“I need your help, man.”

His parents were looking at him, but they said nothing. So Maddox walked over to Rusty, who looked a lot more rested than he had been for an entire semester, and placed his hands on his shoulders. “I need a second driver for the most awesome road trip in the history of road trips.”

Rusty didn’t look like he needed any further explanations. His face lit up, and a grin split it from ear to ear. “I’m totally in!”

“Maddox,” his mom said sternly.

Maddox turned toward her. “You can’t have anything to say against my plan now. I’ll rest, Rusty will drive, and then, he’ll rest, and I’ll drive. We’re going to get there in one piece, I promise.”

“Where are we going?” Rusty finally asked.

Maddox grinned and looked him in the eyes. Then, he grabbed Rusty by the neck and shook him. “We’re going to Jonathan’s house, my man!”

“Wow, what are we going to drive? A boat? A plane?” Maddox squinted as he stared at Rusty, who finally got the cue that he wasn’t making much sense. “Isn’t he like from the royal house of England or something?”

Maddox half-strangled Rusty with all the affection he was capable of. “Luckily for us, he lives on this continent.”

“Ah, good, I was afraid I was going to need to know how to drink tea with my pinky raised.” Rusty gestured to make sure everyone understood what he meant. “I mean, how do they do it? Don’t they like get a cramp?”

“That, my friend, remains to be seen. Because I also plan on using you as a human shield to deal with Jonathan’s folks while I’m busy....” He finally realized that his parents were still listening. “While I’m busy talking some sense into him so that he comes back to Sunny Hill after winter break.”

“Oh, okay,” Rusty said. “So, I’ll have to drink tea, anyway, huh? Don’t worry, my dude. I’ll be your human shield while you bang--”

Maddox put one hand over Rusty’s mouth. “Thank you, man. You’re a true friend. The truest friend in the universe.” Rusty was still trying to mumble something despite having been silenced with a purpose. “I mean it, okay? So, now, I’m going to remove my hand, and you’re going to go home, grab some things, and then we’re off. And, in the meantime, just don’t say anything, okay?”

Rusty finally nodded, and the moment Maddox released him, he turned on his heel to leave. Midway, he stopped and waved at Maddox’s parents while pointing at his mouth with the other hand, to mime that he wasn’t allowed to speak.

“Maddox,” his dad began.

“Dad, please,” he said, “haven’t I been a good kid all my life? I promise I’m going to be safe. And Rusty’s with me. We’ll pay attention to the road and everything. And--”

His dad stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. “I just want you to give you some gas money. And for anything else you might need.”

“Oh, okay. Mom, we’re cool?” he asked while he let out a breath of relief. His mom still seemed to be struggling with an internal debate, but he just rushed to hug her. “Come on, I’ll bring home a noble title or something.”

She laughed and patted his back. “Just go and make that boy and yourself happy. There’s nothing else we want.”

“You guys are the coolest mom and dad in the world,” he declared, making them both laugh.

“But promise us that you and Rusty will stop somewhere and rest for the night. It’s not too late if you two get there tomorrow, okay?”

“I promise. No driving at night,” Maddox said. “And it’s a great idea. We’ll split the long distance like that.”

He wouldn't disappoint his parents, and yeah, he was a good kid.

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Jonathan didn't need a psychic to understand that the atmosphere at the dinner table was quite tense. He was polite toward the Kincaids, but he paid little attention to Drew, who had been seated at his right. His parents were left to make all the effort to keep the conversation going. His earlier declarations of his love for Maddox had left them somewhat flabbergasted, and he wasn't sure they had come out of it yet. Still, they were the perfect hosts, and it didn't look like the Kincaids were keen on addressing the issue of whatever they wished to achieve, either.

After all the plates were cleared from the table, and they had moved to the living room, however, it looked like Drew's father intended to grab the proverbial bull by the horns. "Jonathan," he addressed him directly, which was something of a faux-pas and a departure from their usual modus operandi, "we understand from your parents that you now have a partner." He made it sound like Jonathan and Maddox were some kind of partners in crime.

"Yes, sir," Jonathan said politely, but firmly.

Mr. Kincaid turned toward Mrs. Kincaid, as if he was seeking approval. A short nod from her confirmed that it was all right to continue. "You see," he said, "not only your reputation was affected during the scandal at your school."

Jonathan considered it a good moment to intervene and set things straight. "My old school. It is not my school anymore."

It appeared that Mr. Kincaid wasn't used to being interrupted like that. He frowned slightly and caressed his bushy moustache in an absent-minded manner. "I thought you were only taking a sabbatical."

"No, I have no plans of returning there," Jonathan replied.

"Ah, I see." The scowl on Mr. Kincaid's face did nothing to endorse that decision. "Andrew is here, with us, to right a wrong. Andrew," he said pointedly.

Drew took a step forward, like a kid in school, asked to recite in class. "I apologize for all the trouble I created through my negligence. It wasn't my intention to hurt anyone, especially you, Jonathan."

Jonathan could tell that, underneath the surface, Drew was seething. Although he was performing in front of a very select audience, the red painting the heights of his cheeks told everything about how he truly felt inside.

"Apology accepted," he said, although a part of him wanted to watch the guy squirm for a bit. But no, he wasn't that kind of person. "It is all water under the bridge, as they say."

“Then, I hope you don’t mind if I ask you for a second chance... at friendship.”

Friendship. Like Drew even understood the concept. Jonathan kept his cool, despite a sudden impulse to choke Drew’s insincere words out of his mouth. “I’m afraid that is not possible.”

“Why not?” Mr. Kincaid asked.

“Because there are things that can be forgiven, and things that cannot,” Jonathan said calmly. “If that is all, I would very much like to withdraw for the night.”

Everybody looked at him, somewhat flummoxed by his hasty exit. He had nothing else to say, and he didn’t intend to sit there and take whatever they wanted to dish at him. The time for that was over, and the soonest everyone understood that, the better.

He walked stiffly out of the room, without a look back. Whether they liked it or not, this was the new version of himself. And they all had to live with it.

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It was a sunny day, which made it ideal for a ride, and Jonathan wanted to take Asta out for a bit of action very much. She must have become bored in his absence, although Mr. Simmons had assured him that she was allowed to roam free for a good portion of the day, and that she received the same grooming and attention as when he was there.

“Come on, girl,” he urged her softly, as soon as they were out of the stables.

He breathed freely for the first time in a while. Asta wasn’t built for speed, but she liked a vigorous pace now and then. Jonathan guided her toward the stone wall to the east, from where the beautiful sight of the lake and the forest bordering it on one side could be admired without hindrance.

When he got there, he dismounted and offered Asta the apple Mr. Simmons had handed him as he was walking out the door. The Kincaids would leave today, and that meant that Christmas was going to be a family affair only, something a bit unusual for the Hamiltons. As far as he was concerned, he didn’t mind that at all. Some peace and quiet, finally.

He leaned against the wall and smiled when Asta snorted and shook her head. “Isn’t it nice here?” he asked her and patted her strong neck.

Maddox must have read his letter by now. His phone had been silent, so he had left it in his room so he wasn’t tempted to check it every other minute. There was a lot to process, so he didn’t expect Maddox to call him and try to convince him to go back to Sunny Hill. No, that wasn’t true. He had expected Maddox to be all over him with phone calls and messages and all that.

The silence made him a little sad, although he knew that he didn't have the right to ask Maddox for anything. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the little breeze. The snow squeaked under Asta's hooves, but it wasn't chilly enough to rob him of delight in the beautiful day.

The sound of another rider approaching him pulled him out of his serene tranquility. He stared at Drew mounted on one of the horses offered at the stables for visitors. Not such a long time ago, seeing the guy riding toward him like that would have made him feel butterflies in his stomach.

All he felt right now was annoyance. However, seeing how everything was already said and done, nothing would change even if Drew was coming to see him now for whatever reason.

He waited until Drew got to him but didn't say a word as the guy dismounted and walked over to him. He just watched with what was, hopefully, a slightly bored expression.

Drew seemed pissed. "You really made me look like a fucking schmuck in front of my parents," he hissed at him.

Jonathan leaned against the wall and measured Drew up and down with judging eyes. "Maybe you've always been that."

Drew's eyes flashed with anger. So strange how different things looked in a different light. There was nothing candid and playful in those eyes now, like he had thought before. "Don't fucking try me, Jonathan."

"Try you for what? Just as a curiosity, what on earth were your parents expecting to happen? What were you?"

Drew threw him a loaded look. He clenched his hands into fists. "You're such a fucking piece of work."

"That doesn't answer my questions, now, does it?"

Drew closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I do have a thing for you, you prick."

"Oh. Is this thing related to how easy it used to be for you to manipulate me?"

"Wow. Woe is me much, Jonathan? You were all in for my dick."

"Luckily, I grew out of it."

Drew stared at him with a dark expression in his eyes. "Why don't we test that?"

Jonathan made a disgusted face. "I hope you don't mean what I think you do."

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"Wow, it's a freaking castle!" Rusty exclaimed as soon as they reached the gates.

“Castles should have moats and dragons and stuff,” Maddox pointed out. In all honesty, he was beyond impressed with the property stretching into the distance behind the massive iron-wrought gates. There was a good chunk of a lane before reaching the entrance, and while the building in the back wasn’t a castle, it was the largest home he had ever seen from up close. Usually, he only saw that kind of stuff in documentaries about the rich and famous. Only those houses looked tacky, while this one was not. This one was built by old money, and world-class elegance, and plenty of other stuff he didn’t quite understand.

“Well, I tell it like I see it,” Rusty said matter-of-factly. “And while I don’t see any moat or bridge, I bet there are some dragons inside. Just saying that we should be prepared.”

“All right. I suppose you’re right.” Maddox looked at the gates a bit perplexed. Now what were they supposed to do? It didn’t look like the gates would open automatically in front of them like at the supermarket.

Rusty was already out of the car and inspecting the electronic device on the thick wall on the right. “I think this is where we call for someone to open the gate,” Rusty said with conviction.

Of course, it was. He had seen things like that before. It was only his addled brain that caused him to make little sense of his surroundings.

“Hello?” Someone’s voice came through the speaker. “Please introduce yourself.”

It sounded like an old man’s voice.

Rusty grinned. “I’m Rusty Parker,” he said, leaning forward and drawling the words in a phony accent.

“Pranker?” the voice inquired. “Is this some kind of joke?”

Rusty began laughing. “Pranker is my last name from now on.”

Maddox groaned and pushed him away so that he could stand in front of the speaker. “Hello, sir,” he said. “Is this the Hamilton residence? We’re looking for Jonathan Hamilton.”

“And who might you be, young man?” the voice inquired again, in the same haughty, annoying tone.

“My name is Maddox Kingsley,” Maddox said slowly, punctuating every syllable so that the old man didn’t mistake his name for something else, like in Rusty’s case. That couldn’t be Jonathan’s dad, so it had to be a butler or someone like that. “Could you please tell Jonathan I’m here? I’m his boyfriend,” he said with an importance which he then immediately regretted. What if they weren’t allowed inside because of that?

“Maddox!” the voice exclaimed. “What a surprise!”

Maddox remained nonplussed for a moment. “Um, do you know who I am?”

“Of course, I do! I’ll open the gate for you right away. Is the Pranker boy with you?”

“Yes, he totally is,” Maddox said with a grin. “How do you know about me?”

“Butler’s secret,” the voice said cheerfully. “I’m Simmons, by the way. Just drive straight to the front.”

The whirring sound of the gates opening cut their conversation short. Rusty was already behind the wheel, excited like a little kid. “Let’s go, let’s go,” he yelled at Maddox, his head out the window while he patted the car door impatiently.

Maddox rushed to join him. Wow, so that butler knew who he was? Then, Jonathan must have really told his parents about him.

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An old man in a conservative suit opened the door and smiled at them as they climbed out of the car. “Come, come,” he said and gestured for them to get closer. “Which one of you is Maddox?”

Maddox grabbed Rusty’s hand in time. This really wasn’t a good time for pranks. “That would be me, sir.”

“Oh, please, don’t ‘sir’ me. And you’re Pranker?” The man turned toward Rusty. “The name suits you.”

Maddox wanted to clear up the misunderstanding, but he didn’t have the time. “Can you tell Jonathan to come down, please?”

“He’s out for a ride, but I’ll tell you how to get to where he usually likes to make a stop.”

Maddox smiled. “Super cool, man.”

The butler quirked an eyebrow.

“Sorry, sir, I mean Mr. . . .”

“Simmons, and ‘man’ is fine. Now, can you ride a horse?”

Maddox made a face.

Simmons seemed to understand the reply without even hearing any words. “I’ll give you the keys to the UTV I usually use to inspect the grounds. Come with me.”

The butler closed the door behind him and guided them around the property.

“Should I meet Jonathan’s parents first?” he asked, wondering about the protocol in such situations.

“That can wait,” Simmons said and waved. “Jonathan will be very happy to see you. But leave the Pranker boy here. Three’s a crowd, as they say.”

“Will I have to drink tea with the pinky raised?” Rusty asked, without hiding his rightful worry.

Simmons turned to look at Rusty over his shoulder. “He’s as unique as his name, isn’t he?” he addressed the question to Maddox.

“He’s one of a kind,” Maddox confirmed.

“Hey, I’m right here,” Rusty protested.

“Yes, indeed. We’ll have to brush that hair,” Simmons said. “And maybe change you into something more suitable for the tea room.”

“No way. Are you going to give me a cowlick?” Rusty asked.

Much to their surprise, Simmons laughed. “Got you there. We don’t really have a tea room. You’ll stay as you are, young man. There are few highlights at the end of an old butler’s career. I can barely wait to see Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton’s reaction to you, Pranker. And that would be a highlight of the kind I’m talking about.”

“It’s actually Parker,” Rusty carefully corrected the old man.

“Pranker suits you better. I’ll introduce you as such. And I can always blame it on my failing hearing.”

“What failing hearing?” Maddox asked. “You definitely knew who I was... and you said it’s a butler’s secret. Which can only mean eavesdropping.”

Simmons opened the door to a shed impeccably painted in a light blue color. “That’s a perk of the job. Nothing to do with hearing. Here it is. And now, let me give you instructions on how to get to Jonathan.”

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Drew moved closer, ignoring Jonathan’s body language that should have been screaming at him to keep away already.

“I warn you,” Jonathan said calmly. He straightened up and steeled himself.

Drew stopped inches from him. “Come on, Jonathan, what can some country boy have on me? In case he’s real, which I doubt. I get it that I hurt you, okay? I really do. And you’re right to give

me the cold shoulder, but come on, are you really willing to give up on this? We practically have our parents' blessing."

"Drew," Jonathan said, this time more firmly. "You're not gay. You're bisexual, to some degree, I suppose, although now I'm wondering if you were only getting hard for me because you were high."

Drew pursed his lips. "That's not true." He leaned in, angling for a kiss.

Jonathan moved his head again, without giving up one square inch of space. "Drew," he said again, "I caught you jerking off to pictures and videos of naked women too many times. You don't really want this, whatever you believe it is."

"You're not fair," Drew complained.

Jonathan closed his eyes so that he could hide his impulse to roll them. So Drew was really trying to play the seduction card. He felt absolutely nothing, except for slight annoyance.

It looked like his silence was misinterpreted because Drew kissed his cheek and wrapped his arms around him.

Jonathan reacted by impulse and pushed against Drew's chest as hard as he could. Drew only laughed and upped the ante, pushing one thigh between Jonathan's legs. "I know I make you hard," he insisted.

Jonathan frowned. He hadn't expected this full-on assault, and now it looked like Drew wasn't easy to push away. It didn't matter. Drew was going about things the right way for getting punched in the face, if that was what he wanted. He gathered more of his strength so that he could get rid of the asshole, when a bellow from nearby brought his actions to a halt.

"Get the fuck away from him!"

The shout and the sound of a UTV approaching took them both by surprise. Drew let go of him, taken aback by the interruption.

And Jonathan couldn't keep his jaw from dropping as he watched Maddox jump from behind the UTV's wheel and march straight toward them with murder written all over his face. In several steps, he was by their side, grabbing Jonathan and pulling him toward his hard chest.

"Who the fuck are you?" Drew asked.

"I'm Jonathan's boyfriend, and my name is Mad Dawg!"

Jonathan bit his bottom lip hard. He paused for a moment and then pushed Maddox behind him. "As you can see, Drew," he said in the most serious voice he could manage given the

circumstances, “my very real boyfriend is here. Please, don’t make this difficult. Your parents wouldn’t approve.”

Maddox was fretting behind him, pushing against his back, and pointing at Drew over his shoulder. “Let me at him! I’m going to bite his ear off! No, the entire head!”

Jonathan struggled to contain Maddox with some difficulty.

Drew took a cautious step backward. “Gosh, Jonathan, the company you keep. Is this the kind of white trash you’re going for now? Your parents will be livid.”

“Well, that is only my concern, I suppose,” Jonathan said lightly.

“What did you call me, fat face?” Maddox growled.

“Fat face?” Drew seemed surprised by the insult and brought his hands to his cheeks, only to drop them quickly.

“You look like a pig!” Maddox shouted. “When I’m finished with you, you’re going to be a roasted pig!”

Drew blinked a few times. Jonathan didn’t know how much longer he could keep a straight face. And Maddox just kept piling up reasons for him to break into hysterical laughter.

“Drew, please, just go,” he insisted.

“Well, I’m sorry, but I have just been insulted. I have no intention to leave things like that. Release your... mad dog, or whatever he is.”

As if, Jonathan thought and smirked. “You’re a guest here. Leave with your pride wounded instead of your face. It’s not a choice.”

“I can take care of that,” Maddox assured him, but Jonathan continued to hold him back firmly.

Drew sneered. “All right, Jonathan. If you insist. But we’re not finished. You’ll get over this...” he seemed to be at a loss for words while looking at Maddox, “this country boy.”

“What does he mean by that?” Maddox asked, losing some of his Mad Dawg persona for a bit. “That I look like a cowboy? I’ve only been to a farm once, in fourth grade.”

Jonathan sighed. “Drew, I’ll never get over Maddox.”

“Mad Dawg,” Maddox corrected him.

“I’ve already told my parents about him,” Jonathan continued.

“Yeah, and I told mine,” Maddox added with emphasis.

“And? Are you two going to announce your engagement or something?” Drew crossed his arms and stared at them with disdain.

“Yeah,” Maddox said. “That’s why I’m here.”

Jonathan turned his head toward Maddox so fast he must have pulled a muscle in his neck. He was most likely joking.

“Yeah, I’m not joking,” Maddox insisted. “So stop pissing Jonathan off, and keep your hands off. Or I’m going to show you some country boy moves. One of them includes a foot in your ass.”

Drew made a disgusted face. “Well, Jonathan,” he said in a frosty tone but with a bizarre smile, “it’s your funeral. Too bad I have to leave shortly. I would have excessively enjoyed your family’s reaction to this...”

“One more word, and I’m punching you in the nose,” Maddox warned him.

Drew squared his shoulders, looking like he’d won. Then, he mounted the horse that had brought him there and turned it so that some of the snow under the hooves of the animal sprayed in Jonathan’s and Maddox’s direction. “It’s not goodbye yet, Jonathan,” he threw over his shoulder.

“Why didn’t you let me take care of his ugly face?” Maddox protested as soon as Drew was out of hearing range.

Jonathan turned to finally face the boy he loved so much. He couldn’t stop grinning. “You came,” he said. His heart was too full for any other words.

“Hello,” Maddox waved, “you should have let me beat the asshole up.”

Jonathan laughed, tipping his head back and then kissed Maddox loudly on the cheek. “I couldn’t have let such a thing happen to you. Unlike you, Drew is a bit of a brawler. And he’s trained in boxing since he was sixteen.”

“Ugh,” Maddox said and grimaced. “Still, I would have taken a beating to protect your honor, just so you know.”

“No way am I letting anyone mess up this pretty face,” Jonathan teased and kissed him on the nose. “I like you with all your teeth, and this perfect nose.”

Maddox growled playfully. Only then, Jonathan realized that he hadn’t really addressed why Maddox was there. A few of his doubts from before returned, as he let go of Maddox. He leaned against the stone wall again. “So,” he said, trying to act as casually as he could manage, “did you watch the video?”

Maddox was highly adept at reading the room. He came to rest against the wall by his side. “Yeah, I did,” he replied.

“What did you think?” Jonathan asked and looked away, not wanting to read uncertainty or reproach in the beautiful grey eyes.

“I thought you looked beautiful. Damn sexy,” Maddox replied. He didn’t resist as Maddox cupped his cheek and turned him to look at him. “There was just this weird cock in the picture, really yucky.” Jonathan snickered and looked down. Maddox, however, had other plans, and forced him to look up, this time holding his face with both hands.

“His cock isn’t weird,” Jonathan protested meekly, not knowing what to say.

Maddox sighed. “I know. He’s one handsome asshole. I was so dying to mess up his perfect square jaw.”

“He would have wiped the floor with you. You’re just a big marshmallow inside, and we both know it.”

“Well, I’m your boyfriend, so I would have taken my chances.”

Jonathan smiled. “We’re still boyfriend and boyfriend?”

“Totally,” Maddox confirmed. “Although,” he said, frowning a bit, “there’s this rule about good guys not dating bad boys.”

Jonathan snorted. “I know you’re not a bad boy, Maddox. You’re a good guy. No, the best.”

“I know that,” Maddox replied as if Jonathan was stating the obvious. He was looking at him like he couldn’t stop himself from bursting into laughter any minute now.

“Wait,” it was Jonathan’s turn to frown, “are you trying to tell me that I’m the bad boy?”

Maddox nodded in confirmation, his eyes glinting with mischief, his eyebrows raised, and with a smirk on his handsome face. “You totally are.”

“Really? How come?”

Maddox looked up as if he was trying to recall all the reasons he had to call Jonathan that. “Well, you know how to break into buildings...”

“Oh, that,” Jonathan said airily.

“You punched me in the nose...”

“Ugh, I apologized,” Jonathan replied in an exasperated tone.

“You ran away from home...”

“I wouldn’t have met you otherwise.”

“True,” Maddox admitted. “Wait, I’m not finished. You made amateur porn...”

“O.M.G., really?” Jonathan groaned.

“Really hot amateur porn,” Maddox teased him. “Did you just say O.M.G.? But still, bad boy stuff.”

“Are you finished now?” Jonathan moaned.

“Do you have any hidden tattoos?”

“Like where? You’ve seen me naked.”

“Maybe I missed one,” Maddox joked. Then, he laughed and pulled Jonathan close for a sweet kiss.

Jonathan leaned into it, feeling close to melting. Asta broke their moment by snorting loudly.

Maddox offered him a cute grin. “That your horsey?”

“Don’t ever call Asta that,” Jonathan warned him.

“It’s a girl?”

“Yes.”

“Cool. Now what?”

Jonathan examined his boyfriend carefully. “You didn’t come here with a plan, did you?”

“Well, I went with the flow. I’m here to convince you that you’re my boyfriend forever and to make you come back to Sunny Hill. That’s the big picture.”

“All right, I’m good with that,” Jonathan agreed. “Hey, what do you mean, your boyfriend forever? That’s as far as you go?”

Maddox smirked at his attempt to pull his leg. “I haven’t yet met your parents. But I don’t mind shocking them with an engagement proposal. I think they’ll be fine with it, since by now, I suppose they’ve already been shocked enough for the rest of their lives.”

“Why would they be?” Jonathan asked, puzzled.

“Rusty’s having tea with them as we speak, I suppose.”

“Rusty?!” Jonathan feigned an outraged gasp, and then he grinned. “In that case, let’s hurry up and save him.”

“I’d worry more about your folks, but whatever floats your boat.”

Jonathan laughed and pulled Maddox by the hand. “Ah, wait, I’m with Asta, and... did Mr. Simmons give you his UTV?”

“Looks like it,” Maddox confirmed. “You ride in front, and I’ll follow.”

“Are you okay with that?”

“You look really cool in this riding outfit. I must check out your ass while you ride your horse.”

“Must, huh?”

“Totally,” Maddox confirmed and kissed him again. “You know, I think Rusty’s fine. We don’t have to hurry, right?”

Jonathan pinched his cheek. “I’m sure he needs us. And don’t worry, I can strut around in my riding outfit for you later.”

“All right, then. But you’ll need to ride me in it.”

“That would be difficult, don’t you think?”

“Then just keep the boots and the cute hat. That will be enough for me.”

Jonathan swore under his breath when Maddox’s hand moved over his ass and squeezed. “Let’s just save Rusty first, all right?”

Maddox laughed. “All right. But you’re not getting out of my request for bareback riding.”

Jonathan rolled his eyes, but then he cupped Maddox’s cheeks and kissed him again. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

## *Chapter Forty-Two – Meeting The Future In-Laws*

Maddox couldn't tear his eyes away as he watched Jonathan elegantly dismounting, as if he was starring in a movie about the wealthy offspring of an affluent family... which he totally was, of course. For Jonathan, this wasn't a role; it was his life, and seeing him here, at his parents' home, made the picture complete.

Jonathan smiled at him as he took off the riding hat and tried to civilize his hair. Maddox smirked and walked over to him. It was a real pleasure to run his hands through Jonathan's usually neat hair that was now tousled and displayed a tiny bit of rebellion in the making.

"What?" Jonathan asked and cleared his throat, after a few moments spent staring into each other's eyes.

"Did I already do this?" Maddox leaned in and brushed his lips against Jonathan's. A small, soft sound escaped from that beautiful mouth and told him his attentions were much appreciated.

"A reminder is always nice," Jonathan replied. He was the one to lean forward now, eager for another kiss.

Maddox let his arms slide around Jonathan's waist. It felt good to have him so close again. Jonathan appeared to think the same as he moved his hands around Maddox's neck, pressing his thumbs right under the earlobes. Maddox appreciated the thought, and especially how firm Jonathan's touch was.

"Ahem," someone said loudly, startling them.

They didn't pull away from each other, though, their only compromise was stopping their kiss. Maddox saw the butler's wrinkled face lit up by a big smile as he took them in.

"Maddox, this is Mr. Simmons," Jonathan was the first to speak, stuttering in the most adorable manner, but without moving his hands away from Maddox's neck.

"We met," the butler confirmed. "I'm the one who gave him the UTV."

"Of course, of course," Jonathan said quickly and bit his bottom lip. "How is Rusty doing?" he asked, only then realizing that they had both forgotten they were supposed to rush to their friend's assistance.

"Entertaining your parents, I believe."

"Oh," Jonathan managed.

"Nothing outrageous, I suppose," Simmons said. "Although he has a tendency to put his hands everywhere." The old man gestured vaguely. "He's probably giving your mother a surge of emotion by examining some old vase from too up close right now."

Maddox decided it was a good moment to intervene. “That’s Rusty for you. He never keeps his hands to himself, but he’s a good guy, I swear.”

“Well, I hope he breaks that ugly old thing,” Simmons murmured under his breath and shuddered in feigned disgust.

“What old thing?” Jonathan asked.

“Nothing, nothing, don’t pay me any mind,” Simmons replied brightly. “I was ordered to bring you, along with the tea.”

“I need to get out of these clothes first,” Jonathan said.

“I’ll help,” Maddox added brightly.

The old butler quirked an eyebrow. “You’re only allowed to wash your hands,” he said promptly.

“But--” Jonathan tried to reason.

“Your father promised that he would fire me today if I failed to bring you as quickly as possible. For all I know, it could already be too late.”

Jonathan groaned, apparently not in the least disturbed by the prospect of losing Simmons. “All right, we’re coming. Just let me take Asta back.”

“Very well,” Simmons acquiesced. “But don’t take long.”

“This dude’s a slave driver, isn’t he?” Maddox murmured as he followed Jonathan into the stables.

“I heard that,” the butler said affably.

“And I see no sign of failing hearing,” Maddox said under his breath, as well.

Jonathan was smiling at their exchange. “Don’t worry, Maddox. Mr. Simmons must like you very much. He doesn’t lend his noble steed, and by that I mean the vehicle you used, to just anyone.”

“I’ll take that,” Maddox admitted.

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Jonathan had an inkling that it was only Mr. Simmons’s wish to whisk them away like that, not even allowing him to get out of his riding clothes. But he had proven quite rebellious in front of his parents by their standards and, now that Maddox was here, he wanted nothing else but for them to like him. It was a sort of secret wish, and he could live without their approval of Maddox, of course, but it would be nice to have it.

They both hurried after the impatient butler, who certainly didn't look his age by how fast he sprinted in front of them, balancing the tea tray with flawless professionalism, as usual.

"Now I'm starting to get Rusty's fears about drinking tea," Maddox whispered.

"What fears are those?" Jonathan asked.

Maddox didn't get a chance to reply because they appeared to have arrived at their destination. The double doors to the living room opened wide, and Jonathan stopped for a moment, confused, just as Maddox was. The musical notes of what could only be interpreted as someone vocalizing poured out of the room. Only that it was a male voice... and, of course, it dawned on him.

The surprise wasn't that Rusty was doing his best to attack impossible notes, but his mom, who unceremoniously grabbed the college kid's cheeks and forced them apart. "Stick your tongue out more, let it all flow," she ordered.

Rusty was already leaning back in fear, grimacing in every possible way. That was no impediment to Jonathan's mother, of course, who seemed keen on making him bend to her will.

"Don't act so weak," she chastised him. "You must be over six and a half feet tall. Your voice must come out a lot more powerfully than this. I'm not even a vocal coach, and I can count ten different mistakes you make."

Jonathan hurried toward his mom. "Ahem," he cleared his throat, "mom, I'd like you to meet my boyfriend, Maddox."

She turned her attention to him with her eyebrows raised and released Rusty from her clutches. The poor thing walked backward quickly, rubbing his cheeks and staring at her, all wide-eyed, as if she was going to attack him again at any moment now.

Jonathan took Maddox by the shoulders and gave a strained smile to his mom. Somehow, he felt that her opinion mattered more than his dad's. She zeroed in on Maddox, and her eyes narrowed slightly. "I'm Francine," she said and offered him her hand, "Jonathan's mother." She let the last word drop as if it weighed a ton.

Maddox shook the offered hand with a straight face. "Nice to meet you, Francine. I'm Maddox, Jonathan's boyfriend." He spoke in the same manner as she had, emphasizing the last word.

The two opposing sides stared at each other for a moment, neither of them breaking the handshake, as if they needed time to assess each other. In the end, it was Jonathan's mom who withdrew her hand. Then, she turned her eyes to her son. "He's awfully pretty, isn't he?"

Jonathan twisted his tongue into a knot in an effort to keep quiet.

“Mrs. H, I assure you,” Maddox said with the most dazzling smile Jonathan had ever seen, “I’m more than just a pretty face.”

“I’ll vouch for that,” Rusty added. Somehow, he had ended up behind the sofa and appeared to consider himself safe there. “He can touch his nose with his tongue.”

“No, I can’t,” Maddox contradicted his friend.

“Oh, yeah, that’s me,” Rusty agreed and began demonstrating that particular skill.

Jonathan pretended to be suddenly fascinated by an invisible crack in the ceiling. His mom didn’t seem taken aback by Rusty’s antics, however.

“Can you also sing?” Francine asked, examining Maddox with interest. Then, turning toward Rusty. “Not that you can, dear. There’s a mountain to climb until you get anywhere near that destination.”

Jonathan considered it a good moment to interrupt. “Mom, Rusty has a wonderful voice.”

Francine smiled, all-knowingly. “A so-called diamond in the rough has no value and no room to be displayed for people to see. It needs a lot of work first.”

Jonathan groaned. “That was a compliment, Rusty, trust me.”

“Taken,” Rusty agreed, with one hand up, after giving up on forcing his tongue out and up toward the tip of his nose.

“Tea is served, madam,” Mr. Simmons intervened.

“Can I skip the tea?” Rusty asked, with his hand still up.

“No. Simmons, I’m sure, bent over backwards to make it,” Francine said in an airy tone.

Hmm, Jonathan thought as he examined his mom briefly. That was a joke, which meant she was pleased.

“Don’t stand over there, come sit here,” she ordered Rusty, who had no choice but to obey the order and walk around the couch to sit by her side.

She said nothing while she poured each one a cup and handed the tea around. Rusty sniffed his cup and made a face but smiled broadly right away. “Smells like rich people’s tea,” he said.

Jonathan grinned and watched his mother’s reaction. Francine, however, seemed perfectly undisturbed, as if she was accustomed to treating college kids to tea every day. “So,” she started, “what are your intentions with my Jonathan, Maddox?”

“They’re of the best kind,” Maddox replied, without flinching.

“Mom, let’s not make this awkward. Don’t interrogate Maddox like this.”

“Ah, I see. What do you two have to hide?”

“Nothing,” Jonathan said defensively. She was an expert at dragging defensiveness out of him. Now, it seemed as if there was something to hide.

“Mrs. Hamilton--” Maddox began.

“Francine, please. No need for formalities since you’re interested in becoming one of us.”

“Mother,” Jonathan said a bit more pointedly to draw her attention.

“Maddox and Jonathan did it,” Rusty blurted out while fidgeting nervously in his place. “I mean, they’re in love and all that. I can sing at the wedding.”

The strange outburst from Rusty seemed enough to redirect the eye of Sauron. Francine turned toward the troublemaker. “You’ll sing at the wedding if I approve.”

“Maddox is just my boyfriend,” Jonathan decided that he needed to get the conversation back on a normal track. “Let’s not jump the shark here, all right?”

“Ah, and I thought this impromptu visit had a somewhat romantic reason behind it,” Francine said and sipped from her cup.

“We’re too young for that, don’t you think?” Jonathan hurried to say.

“So, romance is for old people nowadays?” Francine asked.

“We’re practical people,” Maddox intervened. “First, we need to finish our studies.”

“I see,” Francine said.

“And get jobs,” Maddox added. “And get to know each other a bit more.”

“So, you’re not sure,” Francine concluded. “That means that Jonathan can remain open to other prospects.”

Jonathan leaned forward, ready to contradict his mother, but Maddox was faster. “I’m completely sure. I just wanted you to know I’m responsible. But, heck, I guess there’s no point in hiding it. I’m here so that we can announce our engagement.”

That bombshell seemed enough to render his mother speechless for a moment. “Engagement? When did this happen?” Her inquisitive eyes rested on Jonathan again.

“It didn’t,” Jonathan decided to stop the madness. His mom and Maddox were like two poker players trying to bluff each other out of the hand. “We’re taking things as they come. I assure

you that I'm not interested in other prospects," he said the word and a tiny scoff for good measure, "and that Maddox is the one and only for me."

"Same here, not in so many words," Maddox chimed in.

"Can I sing at the engagement party?" Rusty intervened with a question of his own.

Good thing his dad walked in at that very moment. Usually, it wasn't the kind of thing Jonathan was looking forward to, but his mom needed to be stopped somehow.

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Maddox tried to maintain a reassuring smile the entire time, especially when Jonathan was looking at him, but on the inside, he was wound tight as a spring. Jonathan's mom was a tough cookie, for sure, examining him with those unnerving eyes that looked exactly like his boyfriend's. It was clear as day for anyone who looked that Jonathan took after her. The same aristocratic nose, the same slight frown, were shared by both mother and son, only softer in her. However, while Jonathan had a certain wariness he carried like a cloak, Francine Hamilton was the picture of self-assurance.

Therefore, he had no idea if he was even ready to meet Mr. Hamilton, now that he had met his wife. If she was a force to be reckoned with, how much of a hard-ass was he?

No time like the present to face his future in-laws, it seemed, because the doors opened, admitting a man in his fifties with a sour expression on his face. While his shoulders were stooped by age, he had a commanding presence, and Maddox could totally see where Jonathan picked up some of his mannerisms.

"We have guests, my dear," Francine said in a suave tone, offering Maddox a sly smile.

Oh, so now she was eagerly waiting to see how he would fare against the big boss. Well, he was ready, as much as that mattered. Without waiting for another cue, he jumped to his feet and hurried toward Mr. Hamilton with his arm extended. "I'm Maddox Kingsley, sir, Jonathan's--"

"Boyfriend," Mr. Hamilton completed his sentence and shook his hand very briefly. "Of your friend," he gestured vaguely at Rusty, "I'm already aware."

Rusty grimaced like a kid caught doing something frowned upon and put his cup on the saucer on the table using both hands with infinite, comical, care.

Mr. Hamilton sat opposite him, which gave Maddox free rein to watch his opponent's every move. Jonathan was the only one still standing, and it didn't look like his parents were bothered by that in the least.

“Have you seen the Kincaids out, dear?” Francine asked and sipped her tea. Rusty was watching her with disturbing intensity. Maddox barely kept himself from leaning over and slapping his friend upside the head. After all, he had dragged Rusty there, and Rusty was Rusty, regardless of circumstances. Something told him that it would do the Hamiltons a bit of good to see someone so out of their social circle drinking tea in their giant living room.

“Of course,” Mr. Hamilton replied, his eyes never leaving Maddox. Maybe the man expected him to squirm under that scrutinizing gaze. No luck there, though. Maddox was sure he was the picture of chillaxation, without looking too loose-limbed. “They were disappointed that they didn’t have a proper chance to say goodbye. To you and Jonathan.” For a fraction of a second, Mr. Hamilton turned his hawk-like eyes to his son.

By how Jonathan straightened up and cleared his throat, that was some kind of scolding. The Kincaids, right. Those were Drew’s parents, plus the asshole. Good thing they were gone.

“We’ve said enough goodbyes to one another to last us a lifetime,” Francine said and smiled.

Her husband didn’t appear particularly pleased with her reply but said nothing. Then, his attention turned to Maddox. “So, Maddox, what do your parents do?”

“They run a construction company together. My oldest brother, Vern, is mostly in charge now, and whenever we have the time, the rest of us help.”

“How so?” Mr. Hamilton asked.

Maddox took a look at his hands. Jonathan had told him that he loved his hands. “I work on site, depending on the project. Yes, I’m talking about the grunt work,” he said without hesitation. He had no reason to pretend to be someone else.

“You’re majoring in--” Mr. Hamilton changed tack.

“Economics,” he supplied.

Mr. Hamilton nodded. “Jonathan says you’re doing well in school.”

There was no question mark anywhere, so Maddox didn’t say anything, waiting for more than that.

“He used to be the king of Sunny Hill. Now I’m the king,” Rusty broke the unnerving silence.

This time, Maddox moved one foot and kicked Rusty in the shin, hopefully quick enough that no one would notice. Rusty gave him a panicked glance.

“Is this title related to some popularity contest?” Mr. Hamilton asked.

“Obviously,” Francine said, although the question couldn’t have been directed at her. “Today, our son brought home two handsome young men. This one,” she pointed at Rusty, “even shows some promise. You’ll listen to him sing later.”

“Oh,” Mr. Hamilton replied and frowned. “What kind of promise do you show, Maddox?”

Maddox was about to start selling himself hard, when Jonathan intervened. “He’s a good man, and that’s not a promise, it’s a reality,” he said sharply.

The tone of his voice must have been unusual because both his parents strained their necks to glare at him. However, Jonathan, although still a bit disheveled from his earlier ride and Maddox’s kiss, stood his ground. “That is the most important thing I care about. If you don’t approve of Maddox, say it now. I’ve discovered recently that I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself, so--”

Mr. Hamilton interrupted. “No need for dramatics, Jonathan. Your friends are welcome for as long as they wish to stay. As for your future, which seems so cloudy to you at the moment, we will speak of at length once you can spare a moment for us to talk alone.”

Was that it? If the way Francine offered her husband a cup of tea and steered the conversation toward some generic topics was any indication, so it seemed. Maddox had to admit that he was a bit disappointed, seeing how he had been so valiantly prepared to go to war with the final boss.

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“Rusty, I’m so going to kill you,” Maddox groaned as soon as they were out of the room.

“Sorry, man, I got nervous and shit,” Rusty replied. “Hamilton, dude, your folks are downright scary.”

“You’ve seen nothing, Rusty, trust me,” Jonathan decided to pour some more gasoline over the fire.

“For real? Ah, man, this is like the weirdest winter break ever,” Rusty complained.

Rusty was right, of course. His parents were difficult to talk to and kept to themselves and whoever they considered their own. Jonathan stole a glance at Maddox, waiting to see the first signs of disappointment. But Maddox just looked back and hooked one arm over his shoulders. “What do you think, babe? Did I knock them off their feet or what?”

Jonathan let out a sigh of relief. “Totally. But you know it doesn’t matter, right?”

“Did I get you in trouble by saying that you two did it?” Rusty intervened.

“I’m sure they have no doubts about the ‘doing it’ part,” Jonathan said. “After that whole thing with Drew--” He swallowed his words.

“Who’s Drew?” Rusty asked. “Did you do it with him, too?”

Maddox took both of them by surprise by swatting Rusty upside the head. “That’s none of your business, dude.”

“All right, all right. But I was just trying to help.”

“Really?” Maddox asked, still keeping one hand wrapped tightly around the back of Rusty’s neck.

“Yeah. I mean, these dudes are really old-fashioned, right? Sorry, Jonathan.”

“No worries,” Jonathan said and bit his bottom lip trying hard not to laugh. He had a feeling Rusty held the key to rattling his parents’ conservative ways.

“So, if they find out that you two did it, they’ll pull a shotgun wedding on you. Problem solved,” Rusty offered in what seemed to be quite a serious tone.

“We’re not at some redneck ranch, Rusty,” Maddox insisted and shook his friend by the neck hard enough to earn a heartfelt ‘ouch’ from him. “These guys might sue me for millions for taking Jonathan’s V-card.”

“V-card?” Rusty perked up right away.

“Shut up, you ass,” Maddox said quickly and threw a guilty look at Jonathan.

Jonathan kissed him quickly on the cheek. “Well, for all that’s worth, it went better than expected. Mr. Simmons is readying your rooms. And truly, you two can stay for as long as you want.”

“Can we stay for Christmas? Will we get some really cool expensive gifts? Like a Ferrari or something?” Rusty asked, bouncing up and down on his feet, regardless of how Maddox tried to keep him still.

“My parents don’t know you that well yet,” Jonathan played along with the joke. “Maybe next year, who knows? But Rusty, how come you sang in front of my mom? I thought it was a very well-guarded secret.”

“I had no idea what to do. And I touched the piano, and your mom thought I was not all here,” Rusty pointed at his temple, “so she might have wanted to calm me down by playing that huge thing, so I thought that I had no choice but to sing, shock her with my uncanny abilities, and then... well, it wasn’t like I had a plan or anything. The moment I started singing, she jumped up from behind the piano and started shouting all kinds of things at me.”

Maddox patted his friend on the back in sympathy. “My dude, I don’t think you shocked her or anything.”

Rusty pouted. “No, she says I suck.”

Jonathan reached behind Maddox to squeeze Rusty’s shoulder in sympathy. “When I hear words like that coming out of my mom’s mouth, I’ll know the world is ending. I know her well, and she was damned impressed, Rusty. But my family believes in excellence above all else, which is why she was torturing you when we came in. If she went to the trouble to tell you anything, that’s because she thinks you’re capable of being the best.”

“That’s true,” Maddox confirmed. “I mean, it looked like she really took a liking to you.”

Rusty’s pleased grin let them know that everything was all right in the world.

“Hey, guys, I didn’t even ask you if you were hungry.”

“I ate all the cookies on that nice tray,” Rusty said promptly. “Ugh, your mom must think something else weird about me now.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that if I were you. And I bet Mrs. Day, our cook, is really happy now, after seeing that, finally, someone appreciates her efforts.”

“I would like to appreciate her efforts every day,” Rusty said promptly.

“However,” Jonathan insisted, “cookies aren’t real food, so how about we stop by the kitchen? But let’s not let my folks know about it. They’re very strict about having meals on a schedule, but you two have come a long way, and I don’t want to be a bad host.”

“I don’t need any food when I have you,” Maddox declared but right at that moment, as if to contradict him, his belly rumbled loudly.

Jonathan laughed and wrapped his arm tightly around Maddox’s waist. “Let’s see if Mrs. Day has something lying around that counts as food.”

“What if she tells on us to your mom?” Rusty asked.

“I’ll plead guilty,” Jonathan assured him.

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Maddox didn’t want to let Jonathan know how impressed he was with everything around, but Rusty didn’t have the same problem at all. “Are those real paintings? Is that like, crystal, or something? I bet the electricity bill is huge.”

Jonathan politely offered answers to everything and looked at Maddox from time to time with a big smile on his face. They didn’t even have to talk to know that they were all right with each other.

They walked into a modern kitchen that appeared to belong more in a high-class restaurant than a normal house, but they weren't in some normal house, to begin with. The old lady watching over some steaming pots turned to look at them with a surprised expression on her face. "Jonathan," she said, "what are you doing here? Dinner is hours away."

"I know, Mrs. Day, but my friends are really hungry, so I was wondering if there's something around here so that I can make some sandwiches for them."

"I'll see to it," the old lady said, but Jonathan stopped her.

"Just tell me where I can find some ham and cheese, and I'll take it from there," Jonathan said.

She looked even more surprised. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. College life taught me some real-life skills lately."

She nodded thoughtfully. Her manner toward Jonathan seemed more reserved than the butler's, but Maddox had an inkling that Simmons had a soft spot for Jonathan, and the other way around too. Mrs. Day pointed Jonathan to where he could find what he needed and observed him from the corner of one eye as he began making sandwiches for everyone. By how she quirked her eyebrows now and then, Maddox could tell that her surprise was only growing with each passing moment.

"Let's take these with us," Maddox said as he grabbed a sandwich, "and you can show us around."

Jonathan nodded, and Rusty was more than happy to take two and stare with a forlorn expression at the last one left. Maddox took it to save the poor man from the pangs of indecision. "I'll keep this one for you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Day," Jonathan said politely. "And please forgive us for intruding on you like this."

"No worries, Jonathan," Mrs. Day replied as she turned toward her pots. "It's not every day I see a Hamilton making his own sandwiches." She said the last words a lot more quietly.

"It looks like you shocked your cook," Maddox said as soon as they were outside, munching on their sandwiches.

"She's my parents' cook," Jonathan took care to point out. "I bet you guys now think that I'm some snotty, uptight jerk, seeing how my family lives."

"Nah," Rusty hurried to contradict him, "that's what we thought when we didn't know you."

"Oh," Jonathan said in feigned surprise. "Was that true for you, as well, Maddox?"

“No, of course not. I fell for you at first sight, don’t you remember?”

“Nah,” Rusty interjected again, “he hated your guts at first sight. Then, he changed his mind. By the way, how did that happen?”

“None of your business, asshole,” Maddox said with good humor.

“One day, you’ll have to tell me. Or I’ll just ask Jonathan. Yo, Hamilton, do you have like a magic stick or something to turn dudes gay?”

“Rusty, I don’t show my magic stick to just anyone,” Jonathan again played along with the joke.

“Ah, but you did. You showed it to me for like a second. If I turn gay, it’s all your fault,” Rusty said.

“Just eat your sandwiches,” Maddox scolded his friend and pushed his shoulder. “And stop reminding me that you saw Jonathan’s junk. If you were less of a friend to me, I would have had to take serious measures, like challenge you to a fight or something.”

“What do you guys want to see first? Maddox, you’ve seen the stables--”

“Stables? Like with horses? Real horses?” Rusty jumped into the conversation.

“Yes, very real horses.”

“Let’s go there first,” Rusty declared. “Oh, sorry, Maddie, did you want to go see something boring, like a museum?” he drawled in a phony accent.

“Rusty, there’s no museum here,” Jonathan said. “And stop teasing Maddox. As his boyfriend, I might have to take his side and think of a proper punishment for you.”

“As long as it’s kinky, I’ll take it,” Rusty said.

They all laughed. Maddox didn’t regret for a moment bringing Rusty along. Jonathan looked so happy right now.

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After half a day spent showing Maddox and Rusty the grounds, Jonathan felt more alive and free than he had ever remembered feeling at his parents’ home. Mr. Simmons had proven very efficient in preparing two rooms for the guests and had insisted on repeating what room Maddox was in so often that Jonathan had to assure him that he understood that bit very well.

Now, that everyone was supposedly heading to their rooms to sleep, and the household was getting quiet, there was only one thing he wanted to do. The door to his dad’s study was slightly ajar, which meant that they could share a word before bedtime.

His mom's voice stopped him before he could reach the door. "It is his choice."

"Francine, it must be merely a fling. I'm not blind. The boy is very handsome, and Jonathan appears to have a soft spot for handsome boys like that. The thing with Andrew Kincaid wouldn't have happened otherwise."

Even though he knew that eavesdropping wasn't a good idea in general, he just couldn't stop.

"You know I rarely contradict you, but I beg to differ this time. I haven't seen Jonathan smile like that in a very long time."

"And is smiling important?" his dad asked with a scoff.

"Yes, it is," his mom said sharply. "Throughout Jonathan's life, we've made decisions for him, decisions we believed to be for his own good. But he left home, George, and that means we failed. Not only that we failed, but that we failed him."

"I don't understand why he would prefer this boy over Andrew," his dad continued, although by the way his voice became defensive, Jonathan could tell he wasn't as sure of his opinions as he usually presented himself to be.

"Because Andrew is, pardon my French, George, what people call an asshole."

The short silence that followed confirmed to Jonathan that his dad was just as shocked to hear his mom say something like that as he was.

"Not even a blind man would think that his apology was genuine. He was just annoyed to be here, doing what he should have been doing a long time ago. And aren't we forgetting something?" his mom continued. "Andrew has a drug problem. Is that something you look for in a son-in-law?"

"Son-in-law? Aren't we getting a little bit ahead of ourselves?"

"If Maddox Kingsley is the one my son wants, I don't have a problem with it. The boy has a spine, obviously. I know that it must be difficult to hear about old history, but I recall very well that the first Hamilton who set foot in these parts was a bricklayer. As for my family, you know that they weren't wealthy, either, when they left their old homes behind in search of a better life."

Jonathan stood there, completely nonplussed. Well, now that was some history he didn't know about.

"Yes, we have a name to uphold and protect," his mom continued, "and yes, it took generations to get where we are, but that doesn't mean that we should become blind to our roots."

"Don't we want more for our son?" his dad asked. "Doesn't he deserve more?"

“I really hope, George, and for your own good, that by that you don’t mean Andrew Kincaid. I detest that boy now, and his parents should have known to educate him better.”

“We don’t know Maddox Kingsley very well,” his dad pointed out.

“We don’t have to. Jonathan is the one who needs to know him. And for once in our lives, dear, let’s prove to our son that we trust him and that we believe in him. We haven’t been very good parents to him lately.”

“He has grown a lot,” his dad admit it. “He’s his own person now.”

“And? Does that scare you?” his mom asked.

No answer came.

“Because it does scare me,” his mom continued, “but I’ll be damned if I’m letting the Kincaids have my boy just because they seem like such a safe bet. Maddox Kingsley is welcome here and to the family, as long as that’s what he wants.”

“Is that your final word on this?” his dad asked.

“Yes.”

“Will you stop being mad at me if I agree?”

“Only if you agree with it from the heart.”

Jonathan heard some rustling of clothes and decided to walk a few steps away. He could tell that his parents were kissing, something he didn’t recall ever seeing them do in front of him.

“However,” he heard his mom speaking again, “that doesn’t mean you don’t have free rein to put Maddox Kingsley through the wringer. He looks to me like a stubborn determined man. I’d love to see that used to express how sure he is of wanting my boy.”

“You mean, our boy, dear,” his dad said in a tender voice that Jonathan had never heard him use before.

“Of course. Maddox and his friend, the wunderkind in progress, have to stay here for Christmas, so I’m going to be very busy tomorrow.”

“There’s still some time until tomorrow,” his dad said.

Jonathan grimaced at the seductive tone in his dad’s voice. Well, he really didn’t need to eavesdrop on his parents getting lovey-dovey with each other. He made sure to make no sound as he moved away, only to almost blow his cover when he found himself face to face with Mr. Simmons.

He put a finger to his mouth to signal that he didn't want his presence to be revealed. The butler nodded with a pleasant smile and then leaned over. "Maddox is in the room--"

"Oh, gawd, Mr. Simmons," Jonathan whispered, "I do have a working memory, you know?"

"Oh, gawd? All right, I'm finally convinced you changed for the better during your time away from home. I will go ask your father if he needs anything before I retire."

"Better not," Jonathan said airily as he hurried past the butler. "I think he'll appreciate it if you didn't, just this one time."

He felt quite pleased with himself as he left a somewhat perplexed Mr. Simmons behind.

### *Chapter Forty-Three – Just Derpy Things*

Jonathan was as silent as a cat as he slunk along the wall and then raised his hand to knock softly on Maddox's door. Without waiting to be invited in, he turned the doorknob and snuck inside, all the while making sure that no one was roaming the hallways at that hour. He gasped in surprise as he found himself face to face with Maddox, who must have gotten close without him realizing it, as busy as he had been with getting inside the room undetected.

"You scared me," he said in an accusatory tone, but he smiled broadly as Maddox leaned in and kissed him.

"Hamilton, you're sneaky," Maddox teased him. "What would your parents say if they saw you visiting me at night like this?"

Jonathan snorted and dropped his head against the door. That only left him open for Maddox to attack the side of his neck with a hungry kiss. It was just getting really good, when Maddox pulled away. "As much as I want to jump your bones, there's something I want more."

"Um, what?" Jonathan asked and continued to rest against the door, while he watched Maddox walk around the room in nothing but a pair of sweatpants. It was quite difficult for him to think of anything but one thing while taking in his boyfriend's naked chest and the treasure trail leading to that place that could make him crazy with pleasure.

"My eyes are up here," Maddox teased him again. "We have to talk, Jonathan."

"Do we?" Jonathan murmured softly. "I thought I was here for some serious bareback riding."

The giddy laugh from Maddox confirmed that at least he wasn't the only one desiring such things.

"You're not wearing your riding boots."

"Well, it would have been a pain to sneak around in them, don't you think? Plus, an even bigger pain to explain them if I was caught."

"It doesn't matter," Maddox said, all good-naturedly. "It just makes my job easier."

"All right," Jonathan said and crossed his arms. "But put on a t-shirt or something. This is all a bit too distracting."

Maddox winked at him and grabbed a tee from his duffel bag. The way the fabric clung to each perfect mound of muscle did nothing for Jonathan's nerves, though. Maybe this was a good time to teach himself some self-restraint.

“Babe,” Maddox started, and this time he didn’t appear to be saying the word in jest or playfully. He ran one hand through his hair and pursed his lips. “I have no better way of saying this. You need to come back to Sunny Hill once the winter break is up.”

Jonathan frowned slightly and sighed. “Maddox,” he said quietly, “I don’t think a couple of weeks are enough for Xpress to forget about me. They will just go public with that video.”

Maddox began to pace the room. “I know, I know, but really... it feels like we’re just letting them win, doesn’t it?”

Jonathan felt his shoulders slump as they seemed to get heavier. “I don’t think... I mean, I don’t want to live through the same thing again. At my old school, well, they really milked it for all it was worth, if you know what I mean.”

“I won’t allow that to happen,” Maddox said and clenched his fists.

“What can you do? I appreciate that you care, Maddox, I really do, but this isn’t the kind of thing that anyone could stop. Even my parents offered to hire some PI to deal with it. It’s just the type of thing that never ends. Huzzah, long live the internet,” Jonathan added with a defeated grimace.

“Exactly.” Maddox walked over to him and grabbed his shoulders. “Are you going to live in fear for the rest of your life? Let anyone who’s disgusting enough to use such a thing to blackmail you any time they want? It could go on forever, you know that, right?”

Jonathan closed his eyes to shut out the hope in Maddox’s eyes for a while. “It’s not really that much of a choice,” he murmured. “I... just can’t deal with it.” He made a move as if to get away from Maddox, but his boyfriend must have anticipated that because he hugged him fiercely and didn’t let him go.

“Jonathan, I’m sure that I cannot stop Xpress from publishing that thing, but I’m damn sure I can beat the crap out of anyone who dares to say anything to you because of it.”

Jonathan allowed Maddox to hug him and hugged him back. He caressed the short hair at the back of Maddox’s head. “Are you trying to tell me that you’re going to live up to your Mad Dawg persona?”

“Why not? It’s for a good cause.”

They pulled away only so that they could look at each other. “I appreciate every supportive word and good intention you have for me, Maddox. But how patient are you going to be with me each time I feel the need to run and hide?”

“As often as I need to for as long as it takes,” Maddox promised. “Come on, babe, you wrote me a seven-page love letter. Are you telling me that we’re planning for a long-distance relationship?”

Jonathan pursed his lips. “That’s something I didn’t think about,” he said. “I mean, of course, I’ll be here, and you’ll be... at Sunny Hill.”

“See?” Maddox let go of his shoulders only so that he could grab Jonathan’s hands and place them on his pecs. “Are you sure you can stay away from all this for so long?”

“You’re driving a hard bargain here,” Jonathan admitted.

“Oh, babe, you don’t even know how hard.”

They burst into laughter at the same time. It took Jonathan a few moments to realize that they were being a bit loud. He put one finger against Maddox’s lips. “I really don’t know what to tell you. I want to be with you. I want to continue to room with Ray and ply him with food, and play board games with him and Hanna. I want to hear about Rusty’s latest adventures straight from the horse’s mouth--”

“Horse, right. Just tell that to him and we won’t hear the end of it,” Maddox interrupted him with a snort. “Jonathan, if you don’t come back, you’ll regret it forever. And the professors all love you, I know it. So does everyone else. What else are you going to do for school? Go back to that horrible place?”

“No, definitely not.”

“Good, ‘cause I don’t really like the idea of transferring there.”

Jonathan laughed softly and caressed Maddox’s cheeks. “I have no idea what to do right now. I’m giving up on my studies for a while, I guess.”

“No shit,” Maddox countered. “For real? And what do your mom and dad say? Aren’t they all about striving for excellence?”

“Maybe I’ll excel at procrastination,” Jonathan said with a forced smile.

Maddox pursed his lips and shook his head. “No way, there’s absolutely no way. You love studying. I’ve never seen anyone cover himself in books like they’re some cozy blanket the way you do.”

“I can still read,” Jonathan pointed out.

“Nope, you’re not going to bail on me like this. And seriously, this castle is a bit cold.” Maddox shivered as if he had just felt a draft. “What if you catch pneumonia and die? I would never forgive you, just for the record.”

Jonathan looked away. He only had to close his eyes and everything rushed back to him, the way it had all happened. He had run away without looking back. But was it going to be easy to stay away now? To leave behind true friends and a real boyfriend on top of everything else was not the same as before, now was it?

“I’ll... I guess I’ll think about it.”

Maddox smooched him loudly on the lips. “Thanks, babe. And, in the meantime, I’ll think of something. Does anyone else know? I mean, I get it that you told your parents, since you mentioned the PI.”

“Ray knows. I just couldn’t lie to him, I swear.”

“I know. He should work for the FBI,” Maddox said matter-of-factly. “He’s like a scary hamster.”

“I won’t let him know you said that.”

“Then I should talk to him. Two heads are better than one.”

“What for?” Jonathan asked.

“To come up with a plan to make sure that Sunny Hill doesn’t turn into some shit show for you. A lot of people are good people there, but we have our weeds too, I guess. Or else, a stupid thing like Xpress wouldn’t exist.”

Jonathan remained quiet for a while. Ray didn’t judge him, and Maddox didn’t, either. They were good people, indeed. “Maddox, you know, if you think it’s all right, I have no qualms with you telling your friends about the blackmail. I mean, they know me, and I know them, and if this remains a secret, I think they’ll blame me for manipulating you for some obscure purpose.”

“Are you sure?” Maddox asked.

Jonathan nodded, even though he felt the same familiar squeeze on his heart. “I don’t trust Xpress not to release the video even if I do what they say. So, I don’t want it to be an unpleasant surprise for them.”

“All right,” Maddox said. “That’s very courageous of you, just saying.” He kissed Jonathan’s temple.

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Maddox had been surprised to hear Jonathan’s wish to let more people know about the blackmail, but that didn’t make him less happy. If there was anyone he trusted without reservation, it was his friends. He knew for a fact that they wouldn’t judge Jonathan, either,

because they were all good people. “I’m sure Dex can ask his dads for some advice. And Kane’s dad is a big shot executive, so he must know lawyers and all that.”

“At least, we don’t have to worry about lawyers with my parents knowing what’s going on,” Jonathan said and offered Maddox an unsure smile. “They know a lot of lawyers, too. Only I don’t want it to come to that. Even if this scandal is nipped in the bud, another will resurface when I least expect it. That video is out there, no matter how much of a problem it is for me. It’s not something that can be changed. So, maybe I don’t want my parents involved too much,” he said.

“Duly noted,” Maddox said promptly.

Jonathan couldn’t suppress a smile as he brushed Maddox’s hair out of his gorgeous eyes. “You’re sexy when you get all worked up like that.”

That was a cue if he knew anything about cues. He leaned into Jonathan’s touch. “You’re not getting away from me, just so you know. And mom’s really dreaming about that title.”

“Ah, the title. I’m afraid I’m going to disappoint everyone in that regard. Apparently, I’m the proud descendant of a long line of bricklayers.”

Maddox stopped and stared at his boyfriend’s face in disbelief. “Are you pulling my leg?”

“I just found out today myself. So, as you can see, we’re very much alike.”

“Hmm, that’s great news. No drinking tea with the pinky raised, right?”

“Unless you want to. For the record, I was eavesdropping on my parents when I heard about it. Let’s keep it our secret.”

“Hey, it’s going to be my family, too, soon, and I’m all for keeping up appearances,” Maddox joked. “What else did you find out?”

“Aren’t you the curious one?” Jonathan teased.

Maddox grinned and snuck his hands underneath Jonathan’s soft shirt. “You know me.”

“Well,” Jonathan sucked in a breath, “they agreed that I’m not going to change my mind about you, and that’s good. The not so good part is that my mom expects my dad to put you through the wringer, whatever that means. On the bright side, my mom really thinks Rusty’s voice is special. She even called him a wunderkind.”

“Let’s not tell him that. It might go to his head,” Maddox said. “He needs a challenge in his life, and your mom just raised the bar. I’m telling you, we might see a different Rusty Parker because of her.”

“Then, that’s settled. Ah, and I know you talked about Dex and Kane, but I just want you to know that I’m all right with letting Rusty know about the whole scandal brewing thing.” Jonathan cleared his throat slightly, like it was difficult for him to talk about it.

Maddox understood as much. “Rusty may be an airhead and a kinkster most of the time, but I’m willing to bet that if there’s someone who’s going to take the situation you’re in to heart the most, it’s him.”

“I got to know him a little during Thanksgiving break.” Jonathan bit his bottom lip and looked away. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring that up.”

“Hey, I was stupid, okay?” Maddox said quietly and moved his hands up to Jonathan’s shoulders and squeezed in apology. “I guess I was surprised by my own jealousy. I don’t think I had ever experienced it in my life before that moment.”

“So, you’re over it now? Completely?” Jonathan teased him with a smirk.

“Completely. If I ever get jealous again, the only thing I need to do is re-read your love letter, and I’ll be fine.”

“You’re going to tease me about that forever, aren’t you?” Jonathan moaned and let his head fall back in feigned exasperation.

“Of course,” Maddox confirmed brightly. “Now, what should I expect from your dad? Is he going to challenge me to a chess game? I hope I don’t have to demonstrate my prowess in riding horses, because I don’t know anything about that. Also, no trivia outside my school curriculum,” he joked.

“Be yourself,” Jonathan said. “Always remember that even if you don’t win him over, that doesn’t mean that you haven’t won me already. And I’d rather you don’t get stressed by this whole thing. We’ve barely survived our finals, right?”

Maddox shook his head and then took Jonathan’s hand. “That totally went out of my mind. Finals have nothing on meeting your parents.”

“I haven’t asked you... what do you think of them?”

Maddox stopped for a moment. “Wait, do you want to know if I like them?” He pointed at his chest in disbelief.

Jonathan shrugged. “It would be nice if you did, but it’s not a requirement.”

“Well, they’re scary, as Rusty said, but your mom is really amazing, and your dad looks so dignified. Mom and dad are going to be over the moon once they meet them. No one in that

neighborhood is ever going to hear the end of it. And I'm happy I met them. However, it's you I want, so let's stop with the serious talk for a bit, what do you think?"

Jonathan nodded in agreement. Maddox pulled him toward the bed, and they lay down on their sides, facing each other.

"Do you know when I realized that I'm really in love with you?" Maddox asked, taking in his boyfriend's beautiful eyes, nose, and lips. He caressed Jonathan's jawline before going lower, moving his fingers over a nice pec and resting on the quick to harden pebble of flesh beneath his touch.

"When?" Jonathan asked, as his breath began to shorten.

"When I realized that I could sit like this with you, watch you, listen to you, without wanting to have sex."

"Oh," Jonathan said, his lips curling in a disappointed smile.

Maddox snickered. "Why the long face? Don't you want me to want you for more than just your gorgeous body?"

Jonathan grinned and grabbed Maddox's chest fast. "Well, if you put it like that..." He began kneading the flesh in earnest, earning a grunt from Maddox.

"You're putting me to the test here, when all I want is to be romantic for a change," Maddox complained.

"I think you proved that plenty when you landed on my doorsteps with Rusty in tow. Wait, did you drive here? I just realized--"

Maddox brought Jonathan's words to a halt with a kiss. "Do you think there's a chance for a shotgun wedding if you sleep here until morning?"

"Nice try, Kingsley. Sorry, in mom's and dad's backyard, we need to play by their rules."

"I see. So, it's high time for a quickie, then?"

Jonathan agreed with a kiss. Maddox didn't waste any time and rolled him on his back, stealing kisses and teasing Jonathan by dodging his whenever he felt like it. As his boyfriend's frustration grew, Maddox's delight in torturing him just went higher. Suddenly, he dropped lower and pulled Jonathan's silk pajama bottoms down over his slender hips. For a moment, he laughed as a very high sprung cock hit him in the face but made quick work of swallowing it halfway and making Jonathan gasp and beg for mercy with his next breath.

"Missed this," he said as he took a moment before diving further down. "A lot."

“Then stop dallying,” Jonathan ordered and pushed his head down.

Yes, that was a part of his boyfriend he liked so much, among many others, the demanding and somewhat domineering side. His own cock got painfully hard and he ground it against the bed as he took Jonathan’s deeper. No way could he do the amazing stuff Jonathan was capable of when he had a cock in his mouth, but he was determined to blow the other’s mind away.

Jonathan moaned and fucked his mouth, his hips rising off the bed in a strained effort to get more. Maddox pushed back, holding him down, his mouth helping win the battle for dominance. Who would have thought he would like it so much, to be held in that position by a strong hand while burning eyes watched him from above? There was so much pure abandonment in those amber eyes that he only felt motivated to do and be more so that Jonathan would continue to look at him like that forever.

Jonathan grunted his warning and threw his head back, pulling him out of his trance. He accepted it all, no, more than that, he was mad about it. He licked the head while pulling back, making Jonathan shudder and moan a soft protest.

“Awesome, babe,” he teased and moved upward until he could reach the slightly parted lips and shared the tasty release.

Jonathan snuck his tongue inside his mouth, making it dirtier and hornier than it should have been after blowing off like that. Maddox couldn’t help but groan helplessly as his neglected cock rubbed against Jonathan’s thigh. Then, his ass was unceremoniously grabbed by eager hands, and he needed to protest. “Hey, you’re killing me here.”

Jonathan didn’t say a word and just flipped him over to return the favor. Maddox didn’t mind at all when Jonathan pushed his sweatpants down completely and forced him to spread his legs wide. After that, it was as if a full-fledged buffet with the tastiest morsels had opened in front of his boyfriend. Jonathan made a meal out of licking Maddox’s balls, reaching naughtily to the tender flesh right under them and dragging moan after moan out of him.

“I know you’re good,” Maddox protested, “but do you think you could go for the main course already?”

“But I really,” Jonathan said through slurps and licks, “really want to do this.”

No time was given for him to ask what his lover meant by that. When Jonathan’s deft tongue reached inside his ass, without as little as an introduction, all he could do was moan. “Oh, gawd, fucking yes, that’s so good.”

The devilish smile thrown his way made him understand that he was not going to be let off the hook that easily. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the thorough rimming, and then the one finger

sneaking inside and probing him everywhere. Jonathan went for two and made him squirm in mind-blowing pleasure, and only after that, his poor cock got what it deserved.

Jonathan was pumping him at both ends, penetrating him with his wet fingers, and sucking him down to the hilt. Maddox didn't exactly know where pleasure started and where it ended. He lived through a cycle of impossible sensations, tears welling in his eyes, drool coating his lips, his entire body taut and building toward release.

He didn't know if he cried out or not. What he could tell, through the endless spasms of his cock inside Jonathan's mouth, was that this had to be the most glorious blowjob of his life. "Babe," he drawled as soon as he was able to speak, "you fucking blew my mind."

Jonathan snickered and kissed his cheek loudly. "Don't let your friends hear you calling me 'babe'. They'll torture you for all eternity."

Maddox sighed contentedly. Not even the prospect of his friends making fun of him for being head over heels could take away from the pleasure seeping into his bones right now. "Hey, what's your pet name for me? You didn't give me one."

"Babe's not exactly a pet name."

"But you're a total babe," Maddox drawled in a phony accent. "It fits you. Now, come on, give me a pet name, or I won't let you go back to your room."

Jonathan lay on his back and put his hands behind his head. It looked like he was using the ceiling as a reference on pet names for boyfriends. "Hmm, how about Ace?"

"Ace?" Maddox asked. "How did you come up with that? Wait a minute, I hope it's not some dude you used to have a crush on or something."

Jonathan laughed, which only made him get up on one elbow and stare his boyfriend down.

"No, I can assure you that I didn't have a crush on him."

Maddox blinked, still unsure why Jonathan was smirking all slyly like that. "Well?" he insisted.

"But he did have the most awesome hair, all black," Jonathan said. "Not a speck of white. And he was nothing but a pack of muscles, they used to say. And he could hunt like no one else."

"Hmm, is that like one of your forefathers, or something? 'Cause that would be so totally weird."

"And he also had the wettest nose..."

Maddox deftly grabbed a pillow and hit Jonathan in the face. "You're talking about a dog!"

“Not just any dog!” Jonathan tried to dodge and bat the pillow away. “He earned enough medals to fill a wall. I can show you pictures.”

“I cannot believe you.” Maddox continued to attack his boyfriend. “I’m calling you an endearing name, and you’re thinking of me like I’m some dog.”

“Well, I can always call you Mad Dawg, but that’s a mouthful.”

“You can bet your sweet lips I’m a mouthful.”

“Ace is much better. Plus, as much as he was a killer on the hunting grounds, he was a totally derpy dog when indoors.”

“Derpy dog? Clearly, you’re spending too much time with Rusty. And what of me makes you think that I’m like that dog?”

“Hmm, I could list a few reasons.” Jonathan was quick to grab the pillow and turn the tables by rolling Maddox over and pinning him underneath. “According to family legend, he was loyal, stubborn, and a very handsome creature. Do those things sound familiar?”

“How about the derpy stuff?”

“Well, he liked to play a lot. My late grandfather always said that Ace had a human heart. He even knew how to play pranks on his grandfather. And he was very intelligent, you know?”

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but all right, call me Ace,” Maddox said. “But not in front of the others, okay? They’ll want to know why, and that’s the kind of thing they might use to tease me forever.”

“We’ll never tell them why,” Jonathan said promptly. “We’re just going to say that I call you Ace, because you’re an ace at everything.”

“Like they’ll believe that,” Maddox said with a snort. “They’re so going to smell blood.”

“Do you want to bet on it? I’ll convince them.”

Maddox groaned and closed his eyes. “Any other ideas for a pet name?”

“I could always call you ‘pup’, but the next thing we know Rusty is going to be asking if I intend to put you on a leash and in one of those masks with a muzzle.”

“Ugh, right. We’ll be heading toward Derpy Town sooner than we can blink.”

“I thought so, too. So... Ace?”

“Yeah?”

“Ha, you answered. Clearly, that’s your pet name.”

“Jonathan Hamilton, you’re a damn sneaky bastard.”

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With everyone gathered around the Christmas tree, all that was left was for them to open their gifts. Jonathan stole knowing glances in Maddox’s direction and winked at Rusty when the troublemaker looked at him and shrugged.

“We didn’t bring any gifts,” Rusty said.

“You are our guests,” Jonathan’s mom said promptly. “We are the ones who ought to apologize since we didn’t have the time to acquire more thoughtful gifts given such short notice.”

Like that would ever happen. Jonathan knew for a fact that his parents had been quite busy during the last two days just to make this occasion special. While holidays had always been cheerful in the family, despite their required strict decorum, this time, Jonathan could tell things were different in a good way.

For one, he could tell that his parents could barely wait for everyone to open their presents, all packaged neatly with bows on top. He couldn’t blame them, as he was in exactly the same boat and wanted to see their special guests’ reactions to his choices in gifts.

“Maddox, please, everyone’s waiting,” Jonathan’s dad said. “Break the ice.”

Maddox smiled and picked what looked like a very voluminous package. He grunted theatrically while he hiked it up and gestured for Rusty to help him. The fast unwrapping revealed what appeared to be a huge collection of books. Maddox turned toward Jonathan’s parents. “Wow, I think this covers everything there is to know about economics,” he joked as he looked through a few while Rusty held the huge box for him.

“No, just what you would need in case you’re considering a PhD,” Jonathan’s dad said promptly.

“I’ll think about it,” Maddox promised with a quirky smile. “If not, they’ll look impressive on my bookshelves.”

“Don’t let them gather dust,” Jonathan’s mom warned, wagging a finger at him.

Jonathan caught Maddox’s arm as he tried to reach for the small package that was from him. “Leave that for later,” he whispered, and then louder, “Let’s see what Rusty got.”

Rusty was giddy like a kid, and for some reason that made everyone around smile, too, infected by his enthusiasm. He dropped the box of books in Maddox’s arms and then grabbed one of the gifts, the larger one, which seemed to have stolen his attention. Rusty stared at the sweater a bit confused and then at Jonathan, with a bit of guilt. There was someone who also still felt a little

guilty over the incident that had landed them both in hot water for no reason other than being a bit foolish.

“Read the note,” Jonathan encouraged him. “And it’s a new sweater, in case you were wondering.”

Rusty nodded and picked up the note. “Nice people deserve nice things,” he read and then smiled broadly and pressed the sweater against his chest. “How do I look? Can I wear it now?”

“Go ahead,” Jonathan said with shrug. “I’m sure you’ll look awesome in it.”

“Leave that for later,” Jonathan’s mom said in a tone that brooked no contradiction. “Open the one from us.”

Rusty didn’t comment, as it appeared that he was willing to listen to everything she said. He opened the small flat package with care, without tearing through the wrapping like before. “Meryl Mayweather,” he read slowly, “vocal coach.” He didn’t continue, and his smile faded. “I can’t take this,” he said and pushed the card toward Francine while looking away.

“Why not?” Francine asked, without hiding her surprise.

“Not now. I mean, I need to finish college. And play basketball.”

Everyone fell silent. Jonathan could tell his mom was debating whether she should berate Rusty for choosing basketball over getting proper training for his voice.

“Very well. It’s not time-sensitive,” Francine said with a wave. “Now, let’s just take this to the dining room.”

Jonathan could tell that Rusty’s rejection of her gift did get to her, but it wasn’t like Francine Hamilton to admit defeat just like that. Before walking away, she turned toward Rusty. “You’ll sing after. I’ll play the piano.”

So, orders had been given. Rusty stood there, holding the card and didn’t move until Maddox squeezed his shoulder.

Jonathan rushed to the rescue. “Rusty, you don’t have to--”

“I’ll keep it,” Rusty said decisively and slid the card into the back pocket of his jeans. “Just tell your mom not to hate me too much.”

“She doesn’t hate you. But don’t be sure that you escaped her clutches. She forced me through French for an entire summer when I was twelve. According to some people, I speak as well as a Parisian.”

“Shit,” Rusty said under his breath. “I’m your bestie, Maddox, but you got me into some serious trouble here.”

Maddox laughed wholeheartedly. “You did that to yourself.”

“True,” Rusty admitted. “Hey, I need to change into that sweater, though.”

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“Wow, your mom can really play the piano,” Maddox said as soon as they were alone.

“And Rusty can sing. So far, it looks like he’s the only one who’s getting put through the wringer after all that talk,” Jonathan replied and hugged him from behind.

“You think? I have to read one million pages about research in economics or something. And I feel like that’s only the first test of many,” Maddox said and leaned back into his boyfriend’s hug. “Now, is it finally a good time to open your gift?”

“Yes, it is.” Jonathan kissed him on the cheek.

In all honesty, Maddox had felt on pins and needles while waiting for the Christmas dinner and entertainment afterward to be over so he could see what Jonathan had chosen as a gift for him. He turned to face Jonathan and began unwrapping the small package. Jonathan watched him closely, so Maddox felt like he had trouble opening the stylish box finally revealed. He took out the bracelet and stared at it for a moment. “It looks expensive,” he said after looking at it for a while.

“Never mind that,” Jonathan said and turned the bracelet so that Maddox could see the inside of the flat plate.

“*For Maddox, Love, Jonathan.*” Maddox remained baffled for a few more seconds. “Wow. I mean, how did you manage to get it engraved so fast?”

“There are perks to belonging to this family.” Jonathan snickered. “Do you like it? I mean, if it’s too much--”

“No way.” Maddox shook off his initial surprise at the costly gift and put the bracelet on his left wrist. “Do I look owned already?” he joked.

“Hopefully, yes. That was my plan all along, you know?”

“Thank you. It’s really awesome. I bet everyone’s going to envy me, now.”

“I’m happy you like it.”

“And I didn’t get you anything.”

“Really?” Jonathan smirked as he rested his arms on Maddox’s shoulders. “You brought yourself. And you know what I wanted the most for Christmas?”

Maddox groaned and rolled his eyes. “You’re not going to sing that, I hope.”

“We’ve had enough singing, I believe, to last us until next year.” Jonathan stopped for a moment. “I really mean it, Maddox,” he said, this time in a serious tone. “You coming here is the best gift I could hope for.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that, because compared to all this,” Maddox gestured around, “I’m a poor boy.”

“Don’t think that. And it doesn’t matter anyway. If we’re still on with that engagement, you won’t be poor for long.”

They both burst into laughter at the same time. Maddox kissed Jonathan on the lips. “You know what’s overdue?”

“Hmm,” Jonathan barely managed, still leaning in for more kissing.

“That bareback riding,” Maddox said with a sly grin and grabbed Jonathan promptly by his shapely ass.

“Then let’s not keep you waiting,” Jonathan said in a breathless voice.

### *Chapter Forty-Four – A Gang Of Great Minds*

After Jonathan told him that he wanted to talk to Rusty by himself about the blackmail, Maddox discovered that the free time he had on his hands was as good as any to begin rallying the troops. His first choice was a no-brainer.

“Ray of Sunshine,” he said cheerfully as soon as the guy picked up.

“Maddox? Maddox Kingsley!” Ray exclaimed, seemingly having forgotten that he had stopped being Maddox’s loyal fan not so long ago. The explanation for the change of heart came swiftly. “Jonathan told me on the phone how you drove night and day to get to him! In case you’re wondering, you’re totally forgiven.”

“I wasn’t wondering,” Maddox teased in turn. “Hey, what are you and Hanna doing for New Year’s? If you don’t have set in stone plans, there’s a party with your names on it.”

“A party with The Amazing Four?” Ray asked excitedly.

“There are going to be other people there, but yeah. Plus, I’m counting on you to convince Jonathan to come to the party, as well.”

“Color me flattered, but I doubt Jonathan would tell you ‘no’ to anything at the moment.”

“Yeah, speaking of which.” Maddox scratched his head and sat on the bed. “Jonathan told me about those messages blackmailing him, and also that he told you, so I was thinking of joining forces.”

“Sure thing,” Ray said brightly without waiting for more details. “Wait, I hope you’re going to convince JJ to come back to school. Once you go JJ’s cooking, you never go back, and that’s a fact.”

“That’s what I want,” Maddox confirmed. “He told me he’d think about it, but I feel like an asshole if I insist for him to do it only for my sake. At his old school, the people were complete douchebags about it.”

“Yeah, I know,” Ray said, his voice dropping with a forlorn sigh. “I promised him that I wouldn’t let the same thing happen to him at Sunny Hill, but I have to admit that I’ve only come up with a handful of ideas so far, and I’m not sure how effective they will be.”

Maddox was rightfully impressed with Ray’s capacity to come up with some plans already. He had only been gripped by righteous anger and had done very little in terms of thinking of a coherent strategy for dealing with the potential fallout of Xpress releasing the video. Still, it didn’t hurt to ask. “Is one of those ideas somehow related to punching anyone who dares to say a thing to Jonathan’s face?”

“And behind his back,” Ray replied. “Seriously, you need to think of all angles when you come up with something like that.”

Maddox couldn't agree more. “Well, I thought of that, too. I haven't yet discarded it. I mean, it could still be an awesome way to deal with fuckers who care too much about other people's lives.”

Ray laughed at the other end. “JJ won't be crazy about it, I bet. He's that kind of nice person.”

“He is,” Maddox said in kind. “So, are you and Hanna on for the party? I'll send you the details.”

“We're totally on board. I mean, she came to see my folks on Christmas, and I'm going to meet her parents, but we can make it to the party. It's for a good cause, and I'll convince Hanna.”

“So,” Maddox drawled, “meeting the parents and all that, huh? What do you know?”

“And you, where are you right now?” Ray asked and laughed. “By the way, what are JJ's parents like? Are they really scary?”

“You'll have to ask Rusty about that. He's already dealt with the toughest side of the family.”

“Ah, Rusty. JJ told me he's also there, with you two. I bet you had an awesome Christmas party.”

“You can say that again.” As much as Maddox enjoyed spending time chatting with Ray, they needed to focus on finding ideas to brainstorm at the New Year's party. “We'll talk about it when we meet up. So, grab Hanna and get her on board. I'm sure she'll help.”

“Totally. See you guys, then. Now, I need to pack my bags so that I can go meet Hanna's parents. Wish me luck!”

“I don't think you need it, but hey, good luck, and come back engaged.”

“Engaged?” Ray perked up significantly at the sound of that. “Wait a minute, are you and JJ planning something outrageously romantic to make the rest of the world look bad? 'Cause I'm not gonna lie, I'll have to hate you two a little.”

“Why, don't you want to propose to Hanna?” Maddox asked.

“Yeah, but she's one hell of a girl, and I don't plan on scaring her off. I'm biding my time.”

They knew they were joking when they talked like that, but Maddox was also very aware that they were both only half-joking. He bid Ray goodbye and dropped to the bed, with his phone pressed to his chest. Pursing his lips, he began thinking of the most effective ways to punish the fuckers writing for Xpress. If possible, he wanted to put a foot so far up their asses that they wouldn't be able to sit for a year.

But first and foremost, he needed to think of ways to protect Jonathan and his fragile self that had been hurt so badly in the past. No way in hell Sunny Hill would be a second bad experience for him. The Amazing Four would take care of that.

Only that they wouldn't be only The Amazing Four. No, they would have Ray and Hanna with them, and, of course, Jonathan. That meant the name needed to undergo some amendments.

Hmm, they had to come up with another name, different from the one given by those assholes at Xpress. But what would be a good one for a gang of great minds?

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Jonathan found Rusty in the living room, all by himself. He was on his feet, close to the piano and was studying the polished surface, his arms behind his back, as if he was a teacher searching for mistakes in the homework of an unfortunate schoolkid.

“Hey, Rusty,” he called out to draw his attention.

He was pleased to see that Rusty was wearing the new sweater, and by the looks of it, he seemed very content with his new look. Rusty turned on his heel to face him. “Hamilton, do you like sneaking up on people?”

“I wasn't sneaking. You were just lost in thought. What were you thinking about?”

Rusty shrugged and moved away from the piano. “Hey, do you think your mom got terribly mad 'cause I don't wanna see that vocal coach? It said something on the note that the first ten lessons have already been paid in full.”

While the notorious troublemaker was trying to make it sound like it didn't trouble him much and that he was only asking out of politeness, it was easy to see how anxious he actually felt. He was digging into his palms with his fingernails, then pulling at the cuffs of his sleeves and dragging them down.

“Don't worry about my mom. She told you the paid lessons are not time-sensitive, so you'll be able to take them whenever you feel like it.”

Rusty hesitated before speaking again, shifting his entire weight from one foot to another, as if he couldn't decide how to stand in a more comfortable position. “What if that time never comes? What if I never go?”

“I suppose she'll be disappointed, but it won't be the end of the world.” Jonathan examined Rusty slowly. It wasn't very often that handsome face was scrunched up in thought, but, in a way, Jonathan was well aware that he was seeing more of Rusty's real face, and not the mask he usually wore, the embodiment of nonchalance bordering on belligerence that he exhibited for the world to see.

“So, she might think of ways to punish me,” Rusty concluded.

If that was the out he needed so that he went to see the vocal coach later, so be it. Jonathan pretended to frown in troubled thought and gave Rusty a long meaningful look. “That might happen. I know I don’t want to be on her bad side, and I’m her son.”

Rusty nodded solemnly and then stared at Jonathan, narrowing his eyes. “Are you fighting with Maddox? ‘Cause I won’t try to stop you two. Lovers’ quarrels,” he declaimed in a phony accent, “are not my specialty.”

Jonathan snorted. “Anything could be your specialty as long as you put your mind to it, I’m sure.”

Rusty was more than pleased with the praise and grinned ear to ear. However, when Jonathan pursed his lips, his smile faltered. “Still, you’re here to tell me something bad.”

“Something bad? No, no, it’s not like that,” Jonathan tried to soften Rusty’s guess. How attuned was the king of Sunny Hill to other people’s feelings that he sensed something like that so quickly? Rusty never ceased to amaze him. “I mean, it is for me, and it’s why I made a run for it once finals were over.”

Rusty didn’t interrupt him, not even with one question, and waited patiently, something that could have been interpreted as out of character for him by someone who didn’t know him well. Jonathan liked to believe that he had come to know Rusty more deeply than most.

“You see,” he continued, “someone from Xpress is blackmailing me by threatening to release a certain video.”

“Xpress?” Rusty asked slowly.

“Yes. These are the messages.” Jonathan handed Rusty the phone, while his eyes darted sideways. The video would be out in the open anyway, so there was no point in backpedaling now. Rusty and everyone else would see it.

Rusty read carefully. “What’s the video about?” he asked. “Don’t tell me they have proof that you skipped school in third grade or something.”

Jonathan began to feel an unpleasant heat creeping up his neck. His face had to be on fire by now, but running and hiding weren’t an option. “No. I’m just in a compromising position with another guy.” He choked on the last words, not knowing how to put it more clearly and bluntly.

“A sex video,” Rusty concluded, saving him from further explanations. “So? It’s no secret to anyone that you’re gay. Wait, is the other guy Maddox?”

“No,” Jonathan denied quickly. “It’s Drew. You’ve heard the name, right?”

Rusty nodded and frowned, his eyes narrowing even more. “Is it some kind of pony training?”

The video was right there, in front of him, but Rusty showed no signs that he intended to open it.

“No,” Jonathan said, and a small bubble of laughter swelled in his chest. “It’s not pony training.”

“What is it, then, that’s compromising? Give me the tl;dr version,” Rusty said.

“Drew does drugs, I go down on him,” Jonathan said in less than a second and then clamped his mouth shut.

“Meh, so basic,” Rusty commented. “People in retirement homes throw wilder parties, Hamilton.”

“Oh, so you’ve been to many of those?” Jonathan asked airily, his good mood slowly returning. It seemed that people couldn’t stay serious for very long in Rusty’s company.

“I’ve been to all kinds of parties,” Rusty assured him. “So, what’s the problem? For the record, if you ask anyone at Sunny Hill if they imagine you suck dick, they’ll say ‘yes’.” He put both hands up. “Just saying. I mean, you’re gay. You like dick, obviously,” he added very matter-of-factly.

If everyone in the world took things in stride like Rusty did, there would be no wars, Jonathan thought with mirth. “Well, I suppose, yes. But it’s one thing to imagine it, and another to see it, right?”

Rusty handed Jonathan the phone back, clearly uninterested in something as basic as a blowjob and someone getting high while getting head. “Yeah. I mean, if it were me, I’d say, just look at the Mighty Thor.” He pointed downward, and Jonathan caught himself just in time.

His lips twitched in a smile. “Well, unfortunately for me, I’m nothing like you.” An explanation was required, however. “At my old school, they gave me hell for it. There wasn’t a day I wasn’t mocked.” He stopped before going further. The last thing he needed was to come across as pathetic and whiny.

“Hmm,” Rusty muttered under his breath. “Are you sure it’s Xpress doing this shit?”

The question took Jonathan by surprise. “They practically say so.”

Rusty’s eyebrows furrowed in thought. “Not quite. They didn’t sign or anything. Like, *Love*, *Xpress* or *Sincerely yours*, *Xpress*.”

“I doubt anyone in college would end phone messages with such words,” Jonathan argued. “But what makes you think it’s not Xpress?”

“I’m not saying that. It’s just there’s something weird about it all,” Rusty replied. “I mean, it’s a douchebaggy gossip site, but I don’t know... they always kind of struck me as stupid.”

Stupid. That was a big word coming from Rusty. Jonathan couldn’t imagine him saying it unless he was joking. And right now, Rusty didn’t look like he was joking at all.

“I mean, do you remember how they bought that dog story? And when they thought they got proof that I was boning you behind Maddox’s back, that was stupid as hell, right?” Rusty continued. He puffed out his chest and began pacing the room, again with his hands behind his back.

Jonathan couldn’t argue. He kept his eyes on Rusty and only then realized that right now, Maddox’s best friend was playing the detective. The only thing missing was an audience of five plus suspects, one of them evidently the murderer.

“All right,” he said. “I can’t exactly say anything against that. But is that proof enough?”

“Xpress never hits home,” Rusty explained. “And they’re completely bonkers and just full of assumptions. And shit. Yeah, that, too. Not only about Maddox’s dog or us playing ball together while I’m wearing your very expensive sweater.” At that, Rusty took a moment to admire himself in a full-length mirror on the wall. Jonathan was pleased he had chosen a good Christmas gift for him.

“Do go on,” Jonathan encouraged him. He had suspected Connor of being Xpress, when maybe he should have suspected him of just being the blackmailer. That definitely put a completely new perspective on things. However, he didn’t want to put ideas in Rusty’s head, at least not before he heard everything the other wanted to tell him.

“But this,” Rusty said, turning on his heel, “sounds really vindictive and personal. Whoever sent you those messages wants to hurt you.”

“And Xpress doesn’t want to hurt people?” Jonathan asked what he thought to be a fair question.

Rusty finally removed his hands from behind his back to wave them dismissively. “They’re just clickbait and think it’s fun. Well, I’m not saying I’m right. Only that this blackmailer kind of threatens you that the video will be made public by Xpress, not that they’ll do it directly. Just saying.”

“Well, it could all be semantics, and the bottom line still stays the same. I’ll get publicly humiliated.”

Rusty tipped his head back and looked at the ceiling. “Hmm,” he said mostly to himself and stayed like that for a while. “Do you know someone who would like to, you know, do you harm?” By the way he struggled with the words, Jonathan could only surmise that Rusty was trying to get into his detective persona to the best of his abilities.

So, at that question, he shrugged. “I don’t want to point fingers. I did think that Connor could be behind it, but I confronted him, and within seconds after that, I got one of those unpleasant messages. I don’t think he could have sent it.”

Rusty tipped his head from side to side slowly and grimaced. “He could have had it already written and just hit send.”

“Yes, you’re right,” Jonathan agreed. “But, I don’t know, I feel like it would be too convenient for me to suspect him.”

Rusty made a circle with one finger through the air. “Everyone’s a suspect until proven otherwise.”

Clearly, they were acting in a detective drama series at the moment. “Come on, Rusty, we can’t say that. Our circle of friends must be above all suspicion.”

Rusty acquiesced with a slow, self-important nod. “All right. But everyone else is a suspect,” he took care to add quickly.

“Fine,” Jonathan admitted. “Only that such a conclusion doesn’t get us anywhere closer to finding the culprit. Wait, did you just drag me into something? Because I came here to talk to you only so that you don’t end up disappointed in me when the video’s released, which clearly it will be.”

“Disappointed?” Rusty scrunched up his nose. “Why? Don’t tell me you suck at blowjobs. By the way Maddox looks each time--”

Jonathan put his hands up to stop whatever was coming next. “The thing is, Rusty, I don’t know what to do. Maddox wants me to come back to Sunny Hill once the winter break is over. And I don’t know if I can do that. I just wanted his best friends to know the reason why.”

“You are totally coming back to Sunny Hill. Wait, when was this leaving school thing on the table? Nobody tells me anything,” Rusty moaned and threw his arms in the air in a theatrical gesture. “By the way, I won’t watch the video. I’m sure Dex and Kane won’t either. I suppose your buddy Ray knows everything.”

“Yes.”

“So? Whose opinion do you care about? No one’s judging you,” Rusty said with determination.

Jonathan couldn’t argue with that. “But the public opinion--”

“Fuck public opinion.”

He fell silent for a moment and stared at Rusty.

“I mean it. Just look at me,” Rusty continued.

“I am looking at you,” Jonathan said, a tad confused.

“Who do you think I am?”

“Um, the king of Sunny Hill?”

“Exactly. How do you think that happened?”

“Well, because you’re a star?”

“Thanks, man, but that’s not the reason.” Rusty stopped for dramatic effect. “It’s because I’m selling them the image they want to see so that they leave me the fuck alone.”

Jonathan was speechless for a moment. He had no idea to what alignment of planets he owed the gift of seeing Rusty in such a serious mood, serving wise comments like hot cakes, but he appreciated it. “They don’t exactly leave you alone,” he pointed out. “You’re a headliner by definition.”

“Yeah. And what do they write? What do they know?” Rusty continued. “I’m telling you. Nothing. None of them knows me like Maddox, Dex, and Kane. They have no idea who I really am. And I like it that way.”

“I feel like there’s a lesson here, but,” Jonathan said while rubbing his forehead, “I have no idea what it is.”

“What’s the worst that can happen once that video is out?” Rusty asked. “Are they going to laugh at you? That’s it?”

Jonathan couldn’t be entirely sure, but he sensed that there had to be some painful story behind that kind of argument. He hesitated, not knowing how to breach the topic in a manner that didn’t come across as nosy, especially since Rusty was obviously trying to help. “Well, in a nutshell, I think so, yes.”

“But why would they laugh at you?” Rusty insisted.

Jonathan felt his skin getting hot again. He looked down. “Because, you know, the nature of the video.”

“The cocksucking, you mean?” Rusty asked, very matter-of-factly.

Jonathan just nodded and cleared his throat.

“But half the population at Sunny Hill or more sucks dick. The other half is getting their dicks sucked. Also, maybe more than half, probably,” Rusty continued in a very academic tone. “We

have the straight guys and gals. I'm telling you, there's a lot of cocksucking going on. Ask anyone."

"I'd rather not," Jonathan said, choking slightly.

"Well, it's true whether you think about it or you don't. Then, there's the gay guys, right? A lot of them must be sucking cock. I mean, even if they're only bottoms, or tops, or versatile, when it comes to cocksucking, they all suck cock, right?"

"Um," Jonathan squeaked, incapable of offering a proper reply.

"You're the expert, you tell me," Rusty said and pointed at him. "And then, there must be some bi guys. Those guys must really suck cock. It's like the gateway to anal, right?"

Jonathan stopped fighting and began coughing at this point. "I wouldn't really know?" he choked out a half-question.

Rusty waved dismissively and made a disappointed face. "Your lack of knowledge in this area is flabbergasting, Hamilton. But it doesn't matter. For your own good, I hope you're better in practice than theory. Now, my point is, everyone is into cocksucking. Otherwise, there wouldn't be over three point five billion results when you search for blowjobs."

"Results?" Jonathan mumbled.

"On the internet," Rusty said brightly.

"You even know the numbers," Jonathan added.

"Hey, we live in the age of information. So, stay informed or gtfo." Rusty made a gesture as if he was inviting Jonathan to leave the room. At this point, Jonathan wasn't that sure that he didn't want to make a hasty exit.

"All this is very interesting," Jonathan cleared his throat once more, "and informative, but I still don't understand what that's got to do with me and my situation."

"The point is," Rusty declared and patted his chest with both hands for no apparent reason, "everyone's a cocksucker. Or, you know, the other guy. Pitchers and catchers, right? Hey, it's your gay slang, not mine."

Jonathan truly believed that Rusty was more well-versed than he was in that particular area of linguistics. "And?" he asked, too lost for words to say more than that.

"They laugh at you," Rusty continued with aplomb, "they laugh at themselves." He crossed his arms and grinned. "I rest my case."

Jonathan stared at him for a couple of moments. “I thought we were in a detective drama, not in a court of law.”

“Eh, I’m moving things around,” Rusty said in a conspiratorial voice. “Whatever floats my boat, it’s it.”

Jonathan couldn’t really argue with Rusty’s arguments. Still, he didn’t see himself capable of walking with his head held high through a throng of people hurling insults at him. Rusty surprised him by grabbing him by the shoulders. “Whoever says anything to you, just say it back to them.”

“How?” he asked.

“It’s simple,” Rusty replied. “Anyone who says ‘you’re a cocksucker’, you just reply, you know, with your aristocratic accent and all that, very courteously and shit, ‘oh, no, sir, you are a cocksucker’. Hmm, maybe something more elitist? Is polesmoker good enough? Ugh, ugh, I know! Fellator! Sounds academic enough?”

“Rusty,” Jonathan argued, “not everyone sucks... wow, the things you have me say with a straight face.”

“Hey, do I need to take this argument further? Don’t worry, I have plenty of aces up my sleeve, like a full deck. So, you say not everyone’s a cocksucker. But guys who have their dicks sucked kiss the chicks who such their dicks. And don’t start me on the gay and bi guys.”

“I don’t dare,” Jonathan said dryly.

“Anyway, they all taste cock one way or another. Even if it’s only their own, which is still pretty kinky, right?”

Jonathan pressed his fingers against his temples. “Are you sure you didn’t want to become a lawyer when you were little?”

“Nah, just a lion tamer.”

It could be a joke, but no one could really say with Rusty.

“So, my man Hamilton, whoever’s not a cocksucker, is a cockkisser.”

“That’s not a real word.”

“It is now. Ah, let me search my knowledge base.” Rusty made a show of closing his eyes and muttering under his breath. “Irrumator. That’s a word, ha! You know, for the guy on the receiving end.”

Like he could argue with Rusty, even if he wanted to. Jonathan took one deep breath. “I told Maddox I’ll think about it. I mean, about returning to Sunny Hill.”

“Don’t think about it. Just come back. You’re not going to dig a moat and have a drawbridge, right?”

“I have a feeling that my parents would have something to say about such renovation plans,” Jonathan joked.

“It would be cool, but never mind that. You’re coming back to Sunny Hill once the winter break is over. Did Maddox tell you anything about our New Year’s party?”

“Yes, and he invited me to come along.”

“You’re coming, then. Don’t worry, we’ll all get on board and think of something.”

That was the same thing Maddox had told him. Jonathan could hardly suppress the warm sensation in his chest and realized that he didn’t have a reason to stop it anyway. “All the talk about the sexual practices of the students at Sunny Hill aside, I’m really grateful for this conversation, Rusty,” he said in all honesty.

Rusty gave him a broad smile and then opened his arms. “Bro hug?”

“I suppose that’s fine,” Jonathan teased jokingly.

Rusty grabbed him, pulled him close, and squeezed him to the point of breathlessness.

Well, not only had he found himself a boyfriend, he had found friends at Sunny Hill. The world didn’t revolve around the narrow corner of the universe where he had lived all his life, and that was an amazing relief.

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“So, how was your convo with Rusty?” Maddox asked directly.

“An eye-opener, I’d call it,” Jonathan said brightly.

“That’s Rusty for you. He really opens your eyes for you, only that you’re not always sure you want to look at what he’s showing you,” Maddox joked.

They both laughed at the same time. “That’s true,” Jonathan agreed. “But he’s an endless fountain of gems of wisdom, so I don’t dare to say anything against that. I’m coming with you, guys, to the party. And I don’t want to make empty promises, but I should be a little gutsier, right? I might come back to Sunny Hill, after all.”

Maddox hugged him. “That’s awesome, Jonathan. Hey, are your mom and dad okay with me and Rusty freeloading for a week?”

“I told them I wanted to keep you here until we leave for the New Year’s party. They were more than happy to hear that. But, I now realize, what will your parents say? They are clearly very attached to you, and I don’t want them to be mad at me for stealing you from them during this time of the year.”

“Eh, you know what they say. The chick must fly out of the nest at some point.”

“I honestly believe that your mom will have something to say to argue against that. Have you talked to them?”

“Shoot, not yet. Ah, my mom is totally going to strangle me, but I suppose that she knows what’s up since she didn’t call, either. And that’s big, since I bet everyone at home is now wondering how things worked out. Also, I need to wish them Merry Christmas.”

“So, what are you waiting for? Christmas day is going to be over soon. You don’t want them to think you’ve become a bad son. They’ll blame it all on me, and I can’t have that. I’m counting on my in-laws accepting me.”

“In-laws, huh?” Maddox asked, and his eyes sparkled with mischief. “I’m happy to see you buying so well into the narrative.”

“A narrative in which you’re here to proclaim your engagement to me? That’s up my alley, I’d say.”

“Up your alley? I like it when you talk dirty.”

Jonathan gave him a long adorable look of confusion. Maddox burst into laughter. “You need to loosen up, Hamilton.”

“Look who’s talking dirty now,” Jonathan said, quirking an eyebrow.

Maddox’s face fell for a moment. “You know what? Shut up.” He put a finger in Jonathan’s face. His boyfriend just blinked slowly and made a move as if he was about to swallow his finger whole. Maddox pulled his finger back, feigning outrage. “I need to call my folks.”

“All right. Should I leave?”

“No.” Maddox stopped Jonathan by grabbing him by the elbow and making him fall on the bed by his side. “Let’s talk to them together.”

“I wouldn’t want to interfere--”

“Nonsense,” Maddox insisted. “See, I can talk like you. We’re practically joined at the hip right now, and I bet that mom is going to love hearing you again.”

Jonathan nodded and smiled. Maddox pulled him close and took out his phone. “Mom, I’m at Jonathan’s,” he began brightly. “You wouldn’t believe where he lives. I’m honoring my promise of bringing home that noble title.”

By his side, Jonathan snickered. Maddox pushed the phone to his ear. “Hello, Mrs. Kingsley, I mean Florence. Merry Christmas, and please do take whatever Maddox is saying with a pinch of salt.”

“Not even a grain of that,” Maddox said, pulling the phone back. “There are real paintings on the wall, and real horses!”

“Maddox, stop embarrassing your host,” his mom scolded him, but he could tell she was laughing. “Tell Jonathan we raised you better than that.”

“You tell him. Hey, is everyone around? I want to wish them all Merry Christmas.”

“Sure they are. When are you coming home?” his mom asked.

“We kind of want to spend some more time here, like, until New Year’s.”

“Aren’t you and Rusty imposing on those good people?”

“Mom,” Maddox whispered conspiratorially, “it will help me blend in with the high society.”

“All right,” she whispered back. “But if you come back home full of airs, I’ll make sure to knock you off your high horse with a broom.”

“Don’t worry, Florence,” Jonathan intervened in a smooth tone, “Maddox assured me he doesn’t intend to learn how to ride a horse.”

“Since when are you a quitter, pumpkin?” his mom scolded him again. “Jonathan will surely love to take you for a ride. Just make sure to be safe,” she added in her usual maternal tone.

“I’ll take care of that,” Jonathan assured her.

Maddox exchanged a short look with his boyfriend. Then, he kissed him quickly. “Just put everyone on, mom. I’m sure they’re all dying to talk to Jonathan.”

### *Chapter Forty-Five - A Well-Planned Revolution*

The cozy lodge was surrounded by tall fir trees and other mountain vegetation, and the heavy layer of fresh snow that had just fallen made it a sight fit to inspire postcard painters. Jonathan had expected that much since Maddox had described the place to him to the minutest detail. It was easy to understand why his boyfriend was so excited to come here. It looked like a winter fairytale setting, but what made it truly amazing was that they were there together. A tender feeling engulfed Jonathan as he held Maddox's gloved hand in his while walking up the steep hill. Just as he was about to comment on the test of endurance forced upon their persons by the location, a thump and a yelp from behind them made them turn.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," Ray shouted at them and waved. Hanna struggled to get him to his feet, but her boyfriend somehow managed to drag her down, as well.

Maddox and Jonathan hurried to help them. As usual, Ray manifested a suspicious passion for the heaviest, biggest backpacks in existence. It made Jonathan remember fondly his first day at Sunny Hill when he had met his roomie slash bestie for the first time. It felt like it had happened a long time ago. So many things had occurred in the meantime, some amazing, some not so much.

Hanna and Ray both laughed as their friends tried to help them get up. Jonathan freed Ray from the impossible burden he called a backpack, but that only gave his bestie the freedom to let himself fall on his back and swing his arms and legs in well defined semi-circles. "Look, guys, I'm making snow angels!"

They were behaving like small children at the sight of all that snow. Jonathan could only agree that it would be impossible to have grim thoughts while surrounded by so much pure white.

"Get up," Maddox scolded them. "I'm sure Dex and Kane are already going through the beer supplies and we're far from midnight. You don't want us to go thirsty, right? Hanna, help a little, will you?"

Ray's girlfriend, however, didn't care about setting Ray straight, and she launched herself into what was her own version of a snow angel. "You guys should try it," she told them with a face-splitting grin. "Don't act like grandpas. And I only care about champagne anyway."

That last comment earned her a snort from Maddox, which made Jonathan wince internally. "Champagne? In your dreams, Hanna. And who drinks that piss anyway?"

Oh-kay, so not that good a time to tell his boyfriend that his parents had a special delivery made to the place. Jonathan grabbed Ray by one leg and threatened to take action. "I will drag you up to the lodge door if that's what it takes."

"Do it," Ray challenged him. "I bet it'd be awesome."

Jonathan growled playfully. “You won’t think the same when you’re wet down to your underwear.”

“What are you guys doing?” someone yelled at them from the top of the hill.

Rusty was already there, apparently, and not so surprisingly since he was the most athletic of them all.

Maddox was the one to reply, “We’re dealing with a bunch of kids.”

“Hurry up,” Rusty yelled again. “We’re organizing a race.”

“What race?” Maddox shouted.

“Who goes fastest down the hill,” Rusty clarified, placing his hands around his mouth to act as a megaphone, although they weren’t that far from each other.

“Don’t believe him,” someone else intervened.

Jonathan gave up on Ray’s leg and watched Dex followed by Kane appearing in the picture. They all had winter gear on, and it seemed that the full team of The Amazing Four was about to be reunited.

“Yeah,” Kane chimed in. “Who would want to go down the slope only to have to climb back up it?” He barely had time to finish his sentence before Rusty grabbed him suddenly, and the next thing, they were both rolling down the hill.

Jonathan had to jump out of the way, and the two ended up stopping against Ray, who acted as an unwilling obstacle.

“That’s it,” Dex bellowed. “I’m coming for you, Rusty!”

Rusty seemed completely impervious to threats as he was busy snow fighting Kane. They didn’t stop to make snowballs, simply using handfuls of the fresh snow to throw into each other’s faces. Soon, Ray was a collateral victim, and Hanna joined in, determined to guard her boyfriend.

Jonathan laughed and shook his head. Instead of Ray’s leg, he grabbed the heavy backpack. Maddox did the same with Hanna’s luggage, and now they were the only ones climbing the hill.

“Can you believe the kids?” Maddox said with a snort.

“Yeah,” Jonathan confirmed, “it looks like we’re the only adults around here.”

They both burst into laughter at the same time. “Yeah, right,” Maddox commented. “You’re up for a snowball fight later, Hamilton. Ever since I visited your folks, I feel a strange competitive streak developing inside me.”

“I sincerely think that you’ve always had it,” Jonathan replied. “Or else, you wouldn’t have ended up with me.”

“Whatcha trying to say?” Maddox drawled. “You make it sound like I got a bad deal.”

“Not at all,” Jonathan said airily. “My mom is really impressed with your determination to get me.”

“Seriously?” Maddox’s face lit up with a smile. “I didn’t notice.”

“We’re secretive like that,” Jonathan said with a wink. “By the way, do you really think champagne tastes like piss?”

Maddox caught on to the trap right away. “Don’t tell me that... Oh, shoot. They, what, had it delivered here?”

“Don’t say my family’s not the go-getter type. This wasn’t even a challenge.”

Maddox sighed from the depths of his soul. “Does this mean I have to get trashed on champagne?”

“Dear, one doesn’t get trashed on champagne. It’s not done,” Jonathan said in a phony accent. “But you’ll have a glass for my sake, right?”

“Only if you let me lick some straight from your skin later,” Maddox said with a naughty wink.

Jonathan licked his lips as he felt the familiar frisson that came, usually, with Maddox’s comments on the topic. During Maddox’s stay at his parents’ house, they had become experts at finding secret places to make out. However, stealing snacks here and there had only made them hungrier for a full-course meal, so it was an understatement to say that he was more than ready to get to the lodge and lock himself inside, with Maddox on the same side of the door, for at least one hour.

He was about to say something to that effect when a heavy arm thrown over his shoulders made him buckle under its weight. Maddox grunted as the same thing happened to him.

“How are my two favorite lovebirds?” Rusty asked.

“In the mood to push you down the hill again,” Maddox said promptly.

Rusty laughed and then smooched Maddox’s cheek with a loud smack. Maddox made a disgusted sound and wiped it off, but that didn’t deter the troublemaker from subjecting Jonathan to the same treatment. Jonathan didn’t hurry to wipe his cheek but didn’t protest either when Maddox reached up with one hand to do it for him.

“Stop slobbering all over us, you dog,” Maddox scolded his bestie.

“But ‘tis the season,” Rusty protested in what seemed like a very genuine manner.

“Rusty,” Maddox sighed, “that’s what people say about Christmas, but we’re past that, remember?”

“You didn’t let me finish. ‘Tis the season to get slobbered all over your face,” Rusty said with satisfaction.

“Yeah, yeah,” Maddox said wryly, “try it once more, and you’ll see what happens. Did you talk to Dex and Kane already?”

“The battle room is waiting, captain,” Rusty replied. “By the way, Jonathan,” he said in a more serious tone, “everyone’s really pissed at this blackmailer. And even if you’re going to see other people at the lodge, they don’t know anything. They’re outsiders,” Rusty added in a conspiratorial whisper.

“Really, not even Louise?” Maddox asked.

Rusty scoffed. “She’s Kane’s woman. He probably let out some details during pillow talk, I don’t know. But the battle room is for Sunny Hill only. Just so you know.”

“Wait,” Jonathan asked, “what’s with all this talk about a battle room?”

“Just a little something to rally the troops properly,” Maddox replied. “The final goal, in case you’re wondering, is to get you back to Sunny Hill, and exact some proper punishment on Xpress and any other morons who dare to laugh at my boyfriend.”

“It might not be Xpress,” Rusty restated his belief in front of his bestie.

“Who else?” Maddox asked aggressively.

“Some other dudes. Or dudettes,” Rusty replied. “I’m not crossing anyone off of my list of suspects.”

“Suspects, huh? Do you have any idea what he’s talking about, babe?” Maddox asked, craning his neck to look at Jonathan.

“Actually, I do. And before you guys make a big fuss and ruin your New Year’s party with making plans to go to war with this invisible blackmailer of mine, I believe it’s a good moment to tell you. You guys don’t have to do anything.” Jonathan stopped Maddox from interrupting with a look. “I’m coming back anyway. It’s time I owned up to my mistakes. Even if that mistake is something as shameful as that.”

“Nothing shameful about sucking cock,” Rusty said matter-of-factly. “You tell him, Maddie.”

Maddox grunted in feigned despair. "I can't believe there's something I can agree with you about, you kinkster." Then, as it finally dawned on him, he turned toward Jonathan while Rusty opened the lodge door for them. "Really, babe? You're coming back?"

Rusty snickered. "Babe," he drawled.

"Shut up," Maddox warned him. "Jonathan, say it again."

"I'm coming back," Jonathan repeated the words. He hugged Maddox and kissed him on the nose. "I'm in no mood for a long-distance relationship, Ace." It was the proper time for some payback.

"Ace?" Rusty caught on right away.

Maddox made a sour face and begged Jonathan with his eyes. Jonathan winked at him. It was just one of their little secrets.

"What about the battle room?" Rusty asked pleadingly.

"That's on," Maddox said. "I won't let anyone laugh at Jonathan, and I have a feeling that the blackmailer won't remain hidden for long. Let's organize ourselves before the party, or otherwise, we won't get results. You know, getting trashed on champagne and all that."

"On champagne? You mean that sweet thing that makes you puke for hours the next day?" Rusty asked. "Who thought that would be a good idea?"

Jonathan raised one placating hand. "My parents. But you guys don't have to drink it if you don't want to."

"Ah, if it's from your mom and dad, I'm sure it's not sweet and gross," Rusty said. "I mean, it must be the real thing."

"Of course, or otherwise the Hamilton name would be put to shame." Jonathan stopped for a moment. "That's my prerogative only."

Maddox comforted him with another hug. "Don't worry about that. I mean, worry, because that is what you do and I respect that. But know that I'll do something about it, and soon."

"I'll hold you to that. No, I'm just joking. I suppose I'm going to be the main headliner for a couple of weeks or so. Then, Xpress is going to move on to something else, right?" He didn't quite believe it, but that wasn't the point. A bunch of students at Sunny Hill or most of them would laugh and sneer behind his back until they all graduated. He could live with that, because the trade-off was worth it. At his old school, that hadn't been the case. Still, he decided to keep that to himself. The last thing he wanted was to ruin the party and have everyone worry about him.

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“We’re hours from the start of the party, but this meeting has an important goal,” Maddox began.

“Wow, so formal,” Kane commented with a shit-eating grin. “One week with your in-laws, and you’re acting all grown up and stuff.”

The battle room promised by his friends was basically the dining room at the lodge, which thankfully, was now empty and free of other guests. The others had been understanding enough of their secrecy, but Maddox had seen the looks exchanged between Kane and Louise. He could only surmise that they wouldn’t be bothered by the larger group.

“What, Kane, are you jelly now?” Maddox stuck his tongue out at him. “You’re not the only one who’s engaged anymore.”

“Seriously?” That was Hanna, staring at him wide-eyed. “Did you guys throw an engagement party without inviting us? Ray, invoke the bestie code right now,” she added, as she turned toward her boyfriend.

“We haven’t thrown that party yet,” Maddox hurried to assuage any hurt feelings. “But I let Jonathan’s folks know about my very serious intentions, and they’re old school. It’s not like I can take it back.”

Hanna pointed an accusing finger at him. “Do you have any plans to take it back?”

“No, of course not,” Maddox replied. “Ray, your girlfriend is trying to scare me. Do something.”

Ray answered his plea by grabbing Hanna and smooching her loudly. Maddox grinned. Yeah, they were adorable like a pair of hamsters.

“Now, that the court is in session,” he continued in the same serious tone, “it’s time to come up with some ideas so that Jonathan doesn’t get the nasty treatment he got at his old school. So, let me start.” He paused for effect and then looked at Jonathan. “Off the top of my head, I’d say slug anyone who dares to sneer or laugh or whatever.”

Jonathan snickered and grabbed his arm to make him sit down. “I appreciate the sentiment, Maddox, I really do. But I don’t want you to get into any trouble.” At the first sign of protest, Jonathan continued. “Your parents work hard to keep you in school. Let’s not turn you into the local delinquent.”

Maddox deflated some, but he had expected that kind of reaction from Jonathan. It didn’t matter, as he had other plans up his sleeve. Only a battle room of this size required the entire gang of great minds to come together.

“I have an idea,” Rusty intervened promptly. Maddox would have been disappointed if he didn’t. “I’m going to do something to push Jonathan out of the headlines like this.” He snapped his fingers to make a point. “I’m telling you, Xpress won’t be able to resist the temptation.”

“But what exactly are you going to do?” Dex insisted.

Rusty got to his feet and opened his arms wide. “The possibilities are endless. I can dress up as a pony and attempt to ride any guy or girl that happens to be in my way.”

“That’s not how ponies work,” Dex insisted. “And since when did you switch to ponies from cat boys?”

“Rusty’s into cat boys?” Hanna asked. “And Xpress hasn’t caught wind of it?”

“Not yet,” Rusty said with self-importance. “I can also organize a naked protest. I will unveil myself like a statue and offer my resistance for a cause. What’s trending nowadays? Maybe write a message on my chest, something like ‘do not eat the whales’.”

“Sunny Hill is basically in a landlocked location, and I’m afraid people are going to have great trouble focusing on your message if you plan on going full monty,” Kane pointed out.

Rusty seemed to consider. “Yeah, I see your point, Kane the bane of all good ideas. Something tells me that going only half naked for a protest won’t have the same impact. Should I write it on my dick?”

Dex face-palmed himself noisily. “I don’t think there’s enough room down there for writing all that.”

“You think?” Rusty challenged him.

Maddox decided that it was a good moment to intervene. “Let’s hear someone else, too. Not that Rusty isn’t able to shock the living daylights out of everyone on campus if he puts his mind to it,” - Rusty agreed at this point with a humph and stared Dex down - “but we need something that will make people think twice before laughing in Jonathan’s face. Or just something that will make them think.”

For a few moments, he looked at everyone around the table, to let that sink in.

“I’m also for slugging anyone who dares to laugh,” Rusty interjected again. “I mean, clearly, it will make them think that they don’t want to get punched in the face.”

“I was thinking more along the lines of thinking why it is a bad thing to judge someone like this,” Maddox replied.

“Especially since most of the students at Sunny Hill have probably done the same thing countless times,” Dex said and rubbed his chin in thought.

“Not most,” Rusty contradicted him. “Everybody sucks cock one way or another.”

Kane groaned and covered his eyes, as if that simple gesture would be enough to make the king of kink disappear. “I don’t even dare to argue,” he mumbled, mostly to himself.

“Yeah, that’s good thinking,” Maddox confirmed.

“We should do something to bring Xpress down if they dare to go public with this,” Hanna suggested. “Maybe Rusty’s idea about a protest is not that bad. Only that we should rally as many people as we can.”

“Most people read Xpress as some kind of guilty pleasure,” Ray chimed in. “I know that’s been my case. Not anymore,” he added with a big sweeping gesture of his hand. “They dare to trash my bestie, they don’t get my time.”

“And if it’s not Xpress?” Rusty asked, making all heads turned toward him again. “I mean, whoever’s behind the messages sent to Jonathan, they threaten with things appearing in Xpress, but it’s not like they say that they’re it directly.”

“That complicates things a bit,” Dex admitted. “I mean, it’s not like we know who Xpress is, but having our attention split between multiple targets, I dunno, it might prove unproductive.”

“We can all agree that stopping Xpress or the blackmailer, in case they’re not the same person or persons, from going public with the video is not feasible. We’re going to be back at Sunny Hill soon, and we can assume that the moment Jonathan sets foot on campus grounds, shit is going to go down.” Maddox looked at everyone closely. “So, Ray and I thought of something to mitigate the damage, and to make sure that Jonathan is not going to regret coming back to school with us.”

“Jonathan’s mom and dad can also sue the school,” Rusty pointed out. “Especially his mom. She’s scary.”

“I told them that I don’t want them to get involved,” Jonathan intervened. “I don’t think waving lawyers and whatnot in front of people who aren’t responsible for this demeaning show is the way to go. And even going after some college kids who think themselves smart by writing a tabloid seems to me like overkill. I guess that what I want to say is,” he stopped for a deep breath, “maybe it’s time for me to get over it, no matter what happens.”

Maddox put a sympathetic hand on Jonathan’s shoulder. “Just let us share our plan. Ray of sunshine, care to start?”

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“So, what do you think?” Jonathan clinked his glass against Maddox’s. It had been nothing short of a miracle to find some proper glasses, but, apparently, Kane’s girlfriend had a keen sense for crystal and whatnot and saved everyone from drinking champagne from plastic cups.

“Let’s take this to our room, and I’ll tell you all about it,” Maddox promised with a naughty smile quirking his lips.

Jonathan felt like he was riding a high, not the chemical-induced kind, of which he knew nothing about anyway, but one made from a cocktail of feel-good hormones. After Maddox and Ray had laid out their plan, Jonathan had been living with a cluster of bubbles in his chest, and he couldn’t blame it on the champagne. “So, we’re ditching the party so soon?”

“They won’t even notice we’re gone,” Maddox said, “but let’s make a quick run for it or Rusty is going to stop us from leaving.”

That was a good point. Jonathan would have argued that he enjoyed Rusty’s company, but he knew why Maddox was impatient. He stole a quick look around and was satisfied to see that everyone was either inebriated or on the way there, and also much involved with other people who weren’t them, so he decided that it was a good moment to make themselves scarce. He pulled Maddox by the hand and winked at him. “Let’s do this.”

He snickered as he climbed the wooden stairs, with Maddox on his tail. His boyfriend had clearly lost all interest in what propriety stood for in the civilized world and was trying to grab his ass, all the while chuckling and murmuring dirty words.

Good thing that the stairs didn’t go on forever. Once on the landing, getting to their room was a piece of cake. Still, Jonathan discovered that it could be a difficult task to turn the knob while having a glass in one hand and trying to fend off Maddox’s overt assault, especially since that wandering hand tended to make his entire skin catch fire and other parts of him to throb with want.

They stumbled into their room laughing and only Rusty’s voice from below calling for them motivated Maddox to close the door promptly and lock it in a split second. Then, he turned toward Jonathan, a finger pressed to his lips. “Let’s be quiet,” he whispered.

Jonathan gave him a thumbs-up. Maddox smiled and took his glass to put them both on the chest of drawers. The next moment, they were embracing and kissing, while all their hands, free now of any objects, could push away layers of clothing and reach for the skin beneath.

It was easy to forget the exact manner or moment when he ended up completely naked, since it was Maddox doing the disrobing. But there they were, free from the confines of their clothes, facing each other and looking into each other’s eyes. Jonathan felt the familiar jolt under Maddox’s intense gaze.

To his surprise, Maddox giggled and smirked. “Look down.”

Jonathan did and rolled his eyes. As they got busy, their bodies had obviously started to react. Maddox’s darker cock was now brushing against the tip of Jonathan’s member, as they both bounced slightly upwards.

“This feels nice,” Maddox said in a sultry voice. He moved closer and while he circled Jonathan’s waist with one arm, he used his other hand to grab both cocks and rub them together.

That was enough to elicit a satisfied, yet pleading moan from Jonathan. Maddox’s touch was firm and pleasing. “So, are you happy to see me?” Jonathan managed a joke.

“Always,” Maddox confirmed. “Now let me do the thing I’ve wanted since I heard you brought champagne.”

The champagne had been delivered to the location, but Jonathan wasn’t about to contradict his boyfriend, especially since he was made to lie face down on the bed, a rough hand pressed between his shoulder blades to prevent him from getting up. He had no plans in that direction, anyway, but it wasn’t as if he didn’t enjoy being taken in hand. He propped himself on his elbows and threw a lewd look over his shoulder. That had the desired effect. Maddox’s eyes hooded with unhidden passion.

“So,” Jonathan drawled, “what is this thing you wanted to do?”

Maddox’s confident smirk returned. Jonathan wedged his cock against the mattress, thankful for the friction, as he took in the way his boyfriend moved, his body such a wonderful thing, made to be admired, loved, and ravished. He shivered and closed his eyes for a moment. It wouldn’t do to lose control so early in this game of seduction. Maddox would surely be disappointed.

Jonathan gasped as he felt the liquid pouring down his spine and his eyes snapped open. “Ah, that,” he said, trying to feign indifference while there was nothing that he felt before like it.

All pretense was gone once the trail of liquid was followed by a deft tongue that took in every inch of Jonathan’s skin along his spine. If asked, he would have laughed at the idea of finding this kind of thing particularly arousing. But this was Maddox, his boyfriend – something he had repeated to himself numerous times over the last week just to make sure it wasn’t a dream – and everything Maddox did elicited this kind of reaction.

Maddox reached the small of his back and grabbed his ass tightly. Jonathan grunted and moaned in anticipation, as Maddox hovered right above his buttocks, just teasing the skin with small licks.

“We’re going to take all night,” Jonathan protested.

“That’s the idea. I basically want to fuck you into the next year. How does that sound for a plan?”

“I can’t say that I’m against it,” Jonathan admitted.

“Oh, so much enthusiasm,” Maddox teased him. “It’s infectious.”

“I’m one moment away from blowing my load, so stop teasing me,” Jonathan said with a grunt, as Maddox pulled his ass cheeks apart and held them like that. He cursed and gasped, as Maddox went for the main course and didn’t hesitate to make a meal out of it. Jonathan rubbed his cock against the coverlet helplessly.

When Maddox let him breathe for a moment, he was thankful that he didn’t have any room to fall. The bed did a good job of supporting him, but his cock was very much in painful need.

Maddox played with his ass, opening him up and teasing him some more.

“Maddox, hurry, please. I mean it,” he whispered.

“Just a little more, or else I’ll start thinking that my cock isn’t big enough for you,” Maddox said as he continued his careful, tortuous ministrations.

“Nonsense,” Jonathan said. “It’s very big, the biggest, you know that.”

“All the more reason for me to take my time preparing you.” A fresh dab of lube, and Maddox buried his fingers to the knuckles inside Jonathan’s ass.

“Damn you,” Jonathan whispered. “There’s no winning with you, is there?”

“I think you know the answer to that one, babe,” Maddox said playfully.

The time to wait seemed to be finally over, because his ass was left alone, a pleasant ache remaining. Soon, however, things changed, and Jonathan sank his teeth into the nearest pillow to stop from screaming his delight out loud at being stretched so well by Maddox’s cock.

As expected, but not quite desired, Maddox went at it slowly at first, making Jonathan beg. At this point, any shame was forgotten. Now he understood what getting your fix meant. Maddox pushing his entire length inside him was that and more. He bucked his hips back, wanting more of it. Maddox laughed and helped him up onto all fours with one arm snuck under his belly. “Babe, you’re so good and tight.”

“Stop with the ‘babe’ thing and get to work. There’s a man here, dying to have you ride him like you mean it.”

“Do you want me to give it to you hard?”

“That’s the idea,” Jonathan said breathlessly. “Don’t tell me you don’t know how to do it. If you don’t, I’ll turn the tables and ride you into tomorrow.”

“Mr. Hamilton, what kind of language is that?” Maddox laughed and finally, pushed himself forward in one go, making him cry out in ecstasy.

“The language that gets me what I want,” Jonathan offered the only honest reply he could find.

“Allow me to do that,” Maddox replied.

No words were needed from that point on. The bed was shaking under them. Jonathan tried to reach for his cock, but Maddox grabbed his wrist and pulled his arm back. Now he was forced to support his weight on just one hand, and the pleasurable sensation in his ass was growing to impossible peaks. Jonathan began cursing under his breath and squeezed his eyes tightly shut. Maddox hammered his ass a few more times, and then he realized that his boyfriend was playing a dangerous game. The inside of his ass twitched, pleased with getting filled, but another part of Jonathan was screaming.

As soon as Maddox pulled away, he straightened up and attacked him. Maddox fell on his back, laughing. “Are you mad, babe?” he drawled.

Jonathan growled and closed the distance between them to bite Maddox’s lips. The master of mischief only laughed and didn’t protest when Jonathan hiked his legs up and began to poke at his backdoor with an enraged and neglected cock.

“Are you going to do me like this?” Maddox challenged him.

Jonathan knew his hands were trembling as he reached for the lube, and it was Maddox who took it upon himself to get just enough of it into him to get inside. He was going mad with pleasure as he sank into the well-known heat of his partner’s body. Maddox grunted a bit too theatrically to be taken seriously, and Jonathan shut him up with a hungry kiss. He fucked his ass and his mouth at the same time, moving his hips amply and going all the way, until he could feel that there was no more room for him to go, although he wanted a lot more, to be swallowed completely by that gorgeous body underneath him.

Maddox grabbed his buttocks to make him hurry, do him harder, faster. Not that he needed to be enticed to do that. He was already doing his best, and the conclusion didn’t wait long to come.

“I love you, I love you, I love you,” he murmured as he moved his hips a few more times, in a more erratic manner than before.

Maddox made sure to hold him there by linking his legs behind Jonathan’s back. “Fuck, you know how to fuck, babe,” he praised him.

Jonathan laughed and pressed their foreheads together. “And you know how to throw a challenge. What was that all about? Don’t you have any mercy for your own ass?”

“Worth it,” Maddox said. “The thing is, back at your folks’, you were starting to go back into your shell and I couldn’t have that.”

“Shell? What shell? I sucked you off at the stables. We made out in your car, in the garage. There were so many times we could have gotten caught.”

“Well, I wasn’t scared. Your mom and dad would have had to accept me as their son-in-law then, no other questions asked.”

“They already accepted you. And you know that.” Jonathan wanted to glare at Maddox, but he was spent. Pressing his forehead into the hollow of his boyfriend’s shoulder felt good, and a rough gentle hand brushing through his hair was lulling him to sleep.

“I wouldn’t mind forcing their hand a little.”

“Maddox Kingsley, with all due respect, you’re a bit nuts. I don’t know if I could have lived it down, being seen by my parents.”

“True,” Maddox admitted. “I’m just teasing you. But I missed you, babe. And I missed this, you know, you taking charge and giving it to me hard.”

“Well, I suppose you’re going to reconsider once tomorrow comes. I’ll have a laugh each time you try to sit down and end up making a face.”

“Nah, I don’t think you will. You’re not cruel. Maybe a bit over-considerate. I’m more in danger of everyone realizing that I got properly fucked only because you will fight anyone who dares to stand in your way when you’re reaching for an extra pillow for my ass.”

“I guess you do know me.”

“Yeah, I do. And you know me.”

They said nothing for a bit, both spent, tired, and pleased beyond words.

“So, do you like Ray’s and my plan?”

“I do. It’s not too much, not too little, not that I could ever accuse you guys of that. And it’s subtle, and a statement --”

“I don’t know about subtle. In case someone doesn’t understand the meaning, Rusty will make sure to clarify it for them.”

“In terms that will leave no room for further confusion,” Jonathan added. “You know what, Maddox?”

“What?”

“I love you and all your friends. And Ray, and Hanna. You’re all amazing friends, and I’m crazy about you.”

“I’m glad. But don’t tell them, or it will go to their heads. For real, I’m so happy that you’re coming back. No second thoughts, right?”

“None whatsoever. With people like you by my side, I believe I’m ready to take over the world.”

“Good, because we’re not going to leave your side. We’re the real deal.”

“I know.” Jonathan curled up on Maddox’s chest, inhaling the intimate scent of sweaty skin and sex. “It’s why I love you all.”

## *Chapter Forty-Six – The Pride Of The Cock*

Walking through the quad at Sunny Hill, flanked on all sides by friends, felt exciting and reassuring at the same time. Maddox had one arm thrown over his shoulders, casual, yet possessive, while Ray stood by his left and held Hanna by the hand.

“Well, at any moment now, I suppose that everyone’s phone is going to blow up,” Jonathan said matter-of-factly. He had decided that he needed to be at peace with whatever happened, but nonetheless, that didn’t mean he didn’t feel nervous at all. Indeed, he didn’t consider himself ready to face the sneers and the laughter. But his support group was there, and that meant the world to him.

Rusty was the one who kept on refreshing the Xpress page, with a focused expression on his face. “My dudes,” he said, “and Hanna,” he added with a deferential look toward Ray’s girlfriend, “it looks like Xpress is really slow on the uptake.”

“Ah, did we make all those cool t-shirts for nothing?” Ray said in a deflated tone.

“We can still have the big reveal, but I think it will only make people confused,” Dex offered. “I mean, not that they’re not cool, but you know, the message wouldn’t make sense.”

“Let’s just wait,” Kane suggested. “How about we sit right there?” He pointed at the group of benches around the statue in the middle of the quad. “Rusty, just keep refreshing that page. In case nothing happens today, we can expect things to blow up tomorrow. We don’t know if Xpress is not just a single person way too much into gossip.”

Rusty scratched his head and remained standing, while everyone else took a seat. Other students flocked to them now and then, drawn to the Amazing Four like usual, but no one, absolutely no one seemed to know anything about the existence of a certain compromising video.

Jonathan didn’t know what to think. Had it all been just a prank, and the blackmailer was backing down, seeing how their bluff had been called? Part of him hoped it was true, but the rest of his brain told him that they were waiting for the other shoe to drop, and that it would happen any moment now.

“Not long, and we should all be heading to class,” Jonathan pointed out. “Maybe the mastermind behind Xpress is sound asleep at this hour. A lot of people must have seen me coming back to campus last night, even if it was late.” Something about all of this didn’t quite make sense.

Rusty paced back and forth, a focused frown on his face. “You know what, guys? I’m doing it. If this blackmailer is such a big ass coward, maybe it’s time to show our hand so that they know that we don’t give a fuck about it.”

“You really want to show off?” Dex asked.

“I’m me,” Rusty said and pointed at himself like Dex should have known better than to ask obvious things. “Sure thing I want to show off.”

While they debated whether their whole operation should be called off or not, something snagged Jonathan’s attention out of the corner of one eye. He saw Connor coming from the direction of his dorm, his hair a bird’s nest, his clothes in disarray, as if he had been woken up and forced to hurry somewhere. It took Jonathan some time to understand that he was hurrying after somebody, and quickly identified the girl in the hoodie he had seen before with Connor.

Only that she wasn’t alone. Two girls in identical hoodies hurried after her, as well, and the similarity triggered another memory, one that at first he didn’t know where to place. The trio came together with flawless choreography, and all three pulled out their phones. Of course, he remembered them, from that day when he had taken Maddox on their first official date. Jonathan frowned, as he heard Connor shouting something at the girls. He was even breaking into a run, and any moment now, he would be able to catch up with them.

However, it seemed like Connor’s plans were bound to be frustrated, as other people flocked into his path, forcing him to put more distance between him and the three girls.

As caught up as he was in watching that scene, he missed the growing murmurs around him. Maddox grabbed his hand, and only then, he tore his eyes away. His breath caught in his chest, as it seemed like the entire population of Sunny Hill was busy with a single thing: to pull out their phones and look at their screens.

“Rusty?” Maddox asked.

Rusty shook his head. “Told you, guys. It’s not Xpress.” He pointed the screen at them to have them see that the gossip column page was still talking about who broke up with who over winter break, and not a word about Jonathan’s compromising video.

“However,” Rusty continued, “I just got sent a little video by an unknown number. Would you guys like to bet on what it’s all about?”

Dex and Kane pulled out their phones, too. A few scattered laughs could already be heard here and there. That was their cue. Ray and Hanna jumped to their feet and shed their jackets, while the others in the group followed their example.

Jonathan felt his skin growing hot as he looked at his friends, all wearing identical t-shirts, on which a hand holding an emoji eggplant stood above the message: *The Pride Of The Cock*, something Rusty had come up with. The message under it was even more to the point. *Laugh if you want a punch in the face*. That had been more like a joint venture between Maddox and Ray, and Jonathan had acquiesced with their desire to have anyone who showed any signs of rudeness at least properly threatened with physical violence.

On the back of the t-shirts, the Xpress logo was encased in a circle cut over by a diagonal line.

Jonathan closed his eyes just as all other eyes began to turn toward him. He could feel them, even if they were behind him, burning holes in him. This was the moment he had feared. And indeed, there were laughs and sneers, and he could hear them. He knew who they were aimed at.

“Hey, do you want me to wipe that grin off your face?” he heard Dex threaten someone.

Suddenly, the laughter died, snuffed out like a candle. Dex hadn’t even spoken that loudly, but it looked like reputation was above all else, here, at Sunny Hill.

“What?” Dex murmured at Kane, in response to some unspoken question. “I didn’t say that I was going to do it with a punch, as Maddox insisted that we write on the t-shirts.”

Jonathan took one deep breath and exhaled when Ray snuck one hand into his. “Are you okay, JJ? You know we’re not going to let anyone make fun of you.”

The warmth growing in his chest was bigger and more overwhelming than the icepick he had felt driven through his heart at the first signs of laughter.

“Cool t-shirts, guys,” one girl said. “The Pride Of The Cock? What’s that all about?”

“It’s about not making fun of people who do nothing that you don’t do when you know no one’s watching,” Dex said promptly. As the biggest of them all, he had taken upon himself the mission of being their mouthpiece. Jonathan was grateful for that, too.

More people flocked to them, interested in their message. No one seemed to be laughing anymore. Jonathan dared to open his eyes and was taken by surprise by a girl he didn’t know who hugged him tightly. “Whoever sent that video is a total scumbag,” she said and then looked over him at Dex, probably seeking the guy’s approval.

Well, that seemed to be a consequence of hanging with the right crowd, and he had no idea how he would express his gratitude in the most appropriate manner later. More and more people, encouraged by the girl’s action, began to follow her example, so soon, Jonathan found himself surrounded and almost assaulted in the friendliest way possible.

He had no idea when he got separated from Maddox, but noticed how his boyfriend was willing to set everyone straight by talking to them in the same friendly, yet firm manner, as Ray, Hanna, and Kane. Dex stood there, his arms crossed over his chest, staring down everyone who dared to do anything else but be supportive, once his mission as first responder, so to speak, was fulfilled.

“We knew that someone was blackmailing Jonathan with this video, threatening to release it to everyone on campus,” Maddox explained, as he was now in charge of speaking to the masses. Jonathan looked at him with adoring eyes. If Maddox ever wanted to run for president or change the world, he would be there for him. He definitely had the charisma, and something more. A big

heart, to go with everything else that made Maddox Kingsley the best boyfriend in the history of boyfriends.

Eventually, Jonathan thought of searching for Rusty with his eyes. Hopefully, the resident kinkster, as Maddox called him, didn't think it was a good occasion to go full monty just for the sake of it. Not that the gathered crowd wouldn't like to see that, Jonathan was sure.

No, that wasn't what Rusty was doing. Instead, he was waving at Jonathan and beckoning him to come closer. "Yo, Hamilton, get busy."

Jonathan disentangled himself from his new and unwanted cheerleading squad and hurried to Rusty. The guy grabbed his arm and made him follow. "It's not Xpress, right?"

"I think not," Jonathan agreed.

"So," Rusty waved with the hand holding his phone, "who's missing from this happy reunion? Look around, and look closely."

Jonathan already knew the answer to that. "It's not Xpress," he said as if he had just realized that. "I think I know who the blackmailer is."

He hurried in the direction he had seen Connor running earlier, with Rusty on his tail. The crowd gathered around the rest of their group didn't pay them any mind while Maddox continued to present the situation, only to be met with nods and sounds of agreement by everyone in the audience.

"Is it your friend Williams? 'Cause I don't see his ass anywhere around," Rusty asked. "Man, that guy's a douche. An eco-friendly douche, but still a douche."

"No, I don't think it's Connor, Rusty," Jonathan said as he broke into a run. He had no idea if he still had a chance to catch them red-handed but hoped for it. A theory was forming in his mind, but he needed to verify it, and a direct confession, straight from the horse's mouth, sounded like a good idea.

"Where are we going?" Rusty asked.

"We're searching for Connor," Jonathan said promptly.

"But you just said--"

"I know, but trust me."

Rusty didn't ask for further explanations. Jonathan almost missed the narrow space between two buildings, but Rusty was ahead of him and gestured for him to follow as he snuck in. The sound of voices reached them, raised and accusatory. They were already far enough from the crowd that it was easy to understand what the voices were saying.

“I told you to forget about that video,” Connor was the one to speak first. “I told you over and over again. I thought you understood as much.”

“You laughed when you saw it,” a girl’s voice shot back at him.

Rusty turned to make a hush sign at Jonathan, one finger pressed against his lips. Jonathan nodded slowly.

Connor let out a frustrated sigh. “Yeah, but that didn’t mean that I wanted to see him publicly humiliated. I have no beef with the guy.”

“We have,” someone else said, another girl.

Rusty pressed himself to the wall in a dramatic move. Then, he peeked for a split second. “Connor’s whole crew is there,” he mouthed at Jonathan. “Look.”

Jonathan put a hand up. He wanted to hear a little more before revealing his presence.

“Why would you even do such a thing?” Connor asked.

“He dissed you,” a third girl said. “Who the hell does he think he is? Don’t tell me you weren’t hurt that he chose that meathead over you.”

“Yeah, he deserves this,” another voice intervened, belonging to a male this time. “It doesn’t matter if you didn’t want him to get punished. Jonathan Hamilton was born with a silver spoon in his mouth but, as a grownup, it looks like he prefers something else.” Sneers and laughs followed that little speech.

Rusty nodded thoughtfully and pursed his lips. “The meathead is Maddox,” he mouthed at Jonathan.

“No, he doesn’t deserve this,” Connor said in a cutting voice. “And why did you go over my head with this?”

“We tried to tell you, but you were acting like a total pussy,” the first girl said.

The insult seemed to silence Connor for a moment.

That only encouraged the girl to continue. “You kept on complaining about how Jonathan Hamilton prefers Maddox Kingsley, you know, the guy who’s everything we all hate. So, we took matters in our own hands.”

“Over me?” Connor repeated, seemingly lacking the words to reprimand his crew.

“Yes, over you. We love you, Connor, but maybe you need to do some more growing to be a proper leader. We’re willing to wait, you know?”

“I’ve never asked such a thing from you.” This time, Connor sounded a bit creeped out by that weird confession of love.

“It doesn’t matter. And it’s out in the open now.”

“Yes, it is,” Connor said. “But for what good? Hurting Jonathan serves who? Aren’t we supposed to be the good guys?” It appeared that he was trying to reason with them.

The girl laughed, and the others followed. “Wake up, Connor, baby,” she cooed in a sugary voice. “It’s all about us against them.”

“What are you talking about?” Connor asked.

“We’re the outcasts, and they’re the popular guys. Let Maddox Kingsley show off now with his cocksucking boyfriend while everyone laughs at them. I bet he’ll drop him like a hot potato.”

“Why are you talking like that?” Connor seemed shocked by the conversation, even more than Jonathan felt. “I thought we got together because we all believed in something, and it wasn’t supposed to be going against the popular guys. It was supposed to be about protecting the environment--”

Harsh laughter interrupted Connor’s tirade. “Really? You know, Connor, sometimes I think you should pull your head out of your ass.”

“Jeez, Rose, mind the language,” Connor reacted.

“Well, let me tell you, and I’m speaking for everyone here. We chose you, Connor, because we needed a guy who could hang out with all crowds equally so that we can find out things about them we could use. You didn’t choose us.”

“I have no words,” Connor murmured, apparently very much shocked by that revelation. “I don’t think I want to hang out with you, guys, anymore. I’m going to apologize to Jonathan in your name, but we’re no longer friends.”

“Seriously, Connor? After everything we’ve done for you?” The girl now sounded agitated.

“Yes, seriously. I have no intention of being associated with you.”

“You’re going to regret this, Connor,” the girl called Rose said in a sharp tone.

Rusty grabbed Jonathan’s arm and hurried him to head out of there.

“What are we doing?” Jonathan asked as soon as they were far enough from Connor and his crew. He was boiling on the inside. “I wanted to tell them a few things myself.”

Rusty grinned. “My dude, why get mad when you can get even?”

Jonathan was about to ask what he meant, when Rusty showed him the phone. Quick thinking had to be the guy's middle name.

"Let's watch the ripple effect," Rusty said and tapped on the screen with satisfaction.

Once more that fair morning, everyone began checking their phones. This time, the puzzlement on their faces spoke volumes.

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"Wow, I have no words, JJ," Ray commented cheerfully while pretending to wash the dishes. "I mean, for real, those scumbags! What do they have against you? Just because you didn't want to get cozy with their pal, the king of douchebags?"

"Connor wasn't part of the blackmail," Jonathan reminded his bestie, but Ray waved like that was a detail that could easily be overlooked. He was about to say something more, when a knock on their front door interrupted them.

"Wow, someone's boyfriend's impatient," Ray commented.

Maddox knew they would be getting together that evening, so Jonathan doubted it was him at the door. He wasn't entirely surprised to see Connor there.

"Can I talk to you, Jonathan?" he asked. He had a somber look on his face and appeared ready to be denied entry.

He had no intention of doing so. After the video taken by Rusty had made its rounds of the campus, Connor's crew had been welcomed by a booing committee when they emerged from their hiding spot. At first, they had been completely taken by surprise, but little by little, they had seemed to understand.

And made a run for it. A literal run in the most literal sense of the word. No one chased after them. If anything, their sudden breaking into a run took everyone by surprise.

Now, as bluntly put before by his friends, he might just get that confession straight from the horse's mouth, only that it wasn't the blackmailing horse who was knocking on his door. Still, he would take it, since he was curious to hear why some strangers would hate his guts so much as to force him to leave the campus and his studies behind.

"Come on in," he replied and stepped out of the doorway, to let Connor enter.

Ray came out of the small kitchen armed with a wooden spoon. "If you do something to Jonathan," he threatened and added nothing more. He just waved the spoon to make sure that Connor understood the message. Jonathan had a hunch that Ray looked up to Dex and mimicked the guy's intimidating ways. As much as Ray looked like it would take several of him to make a

Dex Solomon, the technique appeared to work. Connor's shoulders slumped, in an effort to make him appear smaller. "I have no such intentions and never had," he said.

Ray moved the spoon to the other hand and pointed two fingers at his eyes and then at Connor. "I'm watching you."

"Ray, I'm going to talk to Connor for a bit in my room," Jonathan intervened.

Connor walked toward his bedroom at his invitation, with Ray still watching them like a mother hawk. Jonathan smiled at him and Ray nodded, full of self-importance. Who could be afraid of anything in the world with such a guardian angel, ready to intervene at the drop of a hat?

Once in Jonathan's room, Connor refused his invitation to take a seat. Jonathan, however, sat on a chair and crossed his legs, waiting for an explanation that would throw a bit more light and maybe some sense on the blackmail he had been subjected to.

"I have no idea where to start, Jonathan."

There was a bit of a dramatic undertone in that, but Jonathan decided to let it slide. Good thing Ray wasn't sitting in. He would take Connor apart. "How about you start with how your people found the video?" he suggested.

"They're not my people," Connor said with a grimace. "I thought they were good people, not... whatever they truly are."

Jonathan had his own theory about that. Connor wasn't the kind to have friends; he was more the kind to have followers. Hence the problem of never bothering to get to know them properly. But Connor wasn't there for a therapy session, and Jonathan wasn't interested in giving away free advice.

"I found the video," Connor said in one breath. "I was, um, just watching stuff--"

"Porn," Jonathan corrected him. "You were watching porn."

"Yeah," Connor admitted and looked down, embarrassed.

According to Rusty, one hundred percent of people between twenty and twenty-two in the world were watching porn. Of course, Jonathan had tried to get that tidbit out of his head, but Rusty insisted that he knew more about statistics and porn than any other living being on the face of the planet. Jonathan didn't exactly dare to disagree with that, no matter what his thoughts on the matter were.

"It was a crap shoot, I guess," Connor continued. "Imagine my surprise."

"I'd rather not," Jonathan said. Even if Connor wasn't directly responsible for all that drama, Jonathan couldn't bring himself to sympathize with him too much.

“Well, anyway, it was my fault, because I showed it to them.”

“Your people,” Jonathan insisted.

“I told you, they’re not—Anyway,” Connor decided to let it drop, “they got it into their heads that it could be used against you. I told them to drop it.”

“Was it that girl’s, Rose’s, idea?” Jonathan asked. “Why does she keep hiding her face? Is she someone famous?”

Connor shook his head. “No, she’s just... well, they’re not well adjusted people, let’s just say that.”

“Let’s,” Jonathan said with a shrug. “Wait, is she one of the triplets?”

“Triplets?” Connor asked, somewhat confused.

“There are three girls. They all seem the same,” Jonathan explained. “Are they sisters?”

“Ah, you mean, Rose, Nadia, and Gail. No, they’re not, but they do try to be as similar as possible.”

“Why?” Jonathan asked.

Connor seemed embarrassed by the question. “As I said, they’re not very well-adjusted. Now that I think about it, they were talking all kinds of crazy. They say they want to combine into one person, fool the world, things like that.”

“But Rose is the leader,” Jonathan pointed out.

“Yes, that’s true. Nadia and Gail don’t get out of their dorm room a lot, and when they do, they only do it if Rose is present.”

“That day, when we met in the cafeteria, it was her, right?”

“Yeah,” Connor said, although it felt as if, for a moment, he was wondering if that was true. “I suppose that, in a way, she has always been the real leader of the group. Not me. Otherwise, the others wouldn’t have followed her in all this,” he waved vaguely, “instead of coming to me.”

“Is she in love with you?” Jonathan asked another question he thought legit.

“In love with me?” Connor’s eyebrows shot up. “No. I’m gay,” he said matter-of-factly as if Jonathan had to be hearing that for the first time.

“Well, that isn’t reason enough for her not to love you,” Jonathan pointed out.

Connor shivered for a moment, like someone who had suddenly discovered some creepy crawler moving up their leg. “I have never encouraged her.”

Jonathan didn’t quite believe him, but again, it wasn’t his business. However, Rose appeared to be a manipulative, dangerous person. Who thought up blackmails and talked like that to strangers as she had done in the messages she had sent him? So, it was basic courtesy to tell Connor that. “I’m not in any position to give you any advice, Connor, but I think you should stop seeing her. Even if you’re not encouraging her, she appears to have certain ideas about you.” He hoped his words had been chosen carefully enough to not have Connor believe that he was calling Rose crazy to his face.

“She’s a crazy one,” Connor said in his stead. “I’m staying away from her. And the rest of them.”

“What are they going to do? They’re not the ones who’ve been writing Xpress all these years, are they?” It didn’t appear so, but that was just another item to be crossed off the list.

“No,” Connor confirmed his guess. “They cannot be. They’re not interested in gossip at all, and Rose was quite annoyed whenever I mentioned Xpress.”

“For the record,” Jonathan said, “it wasn’t my intention to turn them into pariahs.”

“Well, it was their intention to turn you into one, so I suppose we can call that poetic justice,” Connor said matter-of-factly. “Anyway, I wanted to come here and apologize in person. If I hadn’t mentioned the video, they wouldn’t have had anything to use against you.”

It wasn’t probably his place to ask, since they weren’t friends, but he had been raised like that. “Are you going to be all right?”

Connor seemed surprised by his question, but after that, he frowned. “Of course, I will. I can always make other friends.”

Or gather other followers. As Jonathan accompanied Connor out of the room, he thought that at least here was someone who didn’t appear to have learned anything from the whole situation and its consequences.

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*Apparently, we were wrongfully accused of some wrongdoings... Ah, our little hearts are still bleeding over it. The Amazing Four thought we were behind the dissemination of a certain compromising video featuring our local royalty, Jonathan Hamilton. Just to make things clear, if we had been in possession of the respective video, we would have never released it. Never. We have standards to uphold.*

Maddox held the phone and read the whole thing to Jonathan. “So, how did Xpress get hold of this video of Connor and his gang?”

Jonathan shrugged. “It’s some big mystery.”

Maddox groaned. “You and Rusty disappeared for like ten minutes or so. Don’t think I didn’t notice.” He pretended to be pissed only so Jonathan would hug him from behind and kiss the side of his neck in apology. “Did you or Rusty take the video?”

“Rusty. I was too busy being outraged by it all. I didn’t even have time to agree.”

“That’s Rusty for you. The sword of justice,” Maddox said with a chuckle. “Those assholes. Why the hell did they do it, anyway?”

“Some misplaced sense of loyalty, I suppose,” Jonathan explained. “Connor wasn’t happy they did that. He even came to me to apologize, although it wasn’t his fault.”

“It was, in a way,” Maddox said.

“How so?”

Maddox turned to face his boyfriend. Jonathan was just too nice and good sometimes. He pressed his fingers against the frown between Jonathan’s eyebrows. “Connor gathered this kind of people around him because he likes being worshipped and never questioned. It’s not exactly like having proper friends.”

“No, you’re right,” Jonathan agreed.

“So, because he has always been a douchebag, he surrounded himself with like-minded people.”

“He wasn’t to blame for this, though. I feel sort of bad. He seems lonely.”

Maddox snorted. “He’ll live. As for the other scumbags, I heard they’re considering a transfer. Because of our little revolution, word got to the powers that be. I even heard that the president called them in for a reprimand.”

“And Rusty as well, who declared that he made the t-shirts,” Jonathan pointed out.

“Don’t worry. He only got a little slap on the wrist.”

“Well, I guess I’m glad I won’t have to run into my blackmailers next year,” Jonathan commented. “As much as you think I’m a nice guy, I’m not entirely sure that I’d be able to keep everything I think and feel about them inside.”

“Don’t worry. For what’s left of this year, they’re going to keep a low profile. Everyone hates their guts. Even Xpress, and that says a lot.”

Jonathan seemed to ponder for a bit. “Maddox, do you really think Xpress would have not released the video if they had it?”

“It’s a tough question. But you know, there is something kind of irking me. When the assholes behind the blackmail contacted you, they said that the video would be dropped by Xpress.”

“So?”

“That means that they might have tried to get Xpress to go public with it and didn’t succeed.”

“Yes, but it all seemed to happen very fast. I suppose they were expecting me to cave in,” Jonathan reasoned.

Maddox shrugged. “Still. It was easier for them to hide behind Xpress.”

“Are we thinking Xpress is kind and understanding now?”

They both burst into laughter at the same time. “I suppose not.”

They stared at each other for a few moments. Maddox was glad they were in his room, because that meant Jonathan would be easy to entice to spend the night. And he liked his big bed a lot better than Jonathan’s narrow one. Not that they couldn’t make do with whatever they had at their disposal.

“You know, I don’t remember if I properly thanked your friends for everything they did for me. Dex really put the fear of all things holy into everyone who dared to do as little as smile the wrong way in my direction.”

“Don’t forget about Rusty running around and pointing at the eggplant on his t-shirt and yelling ‘you’re all a bunch of cocksuckers, pay your respects to the cock’.”

“Funny thing, that was after the entire truth was revealed,” Jonathan commented.

“Can you imagine Rusty missing a chance to bask in the heat of the spotlights?”

“Not really, no. I bet he left at least a few guys feeling very confused about the whole thing. Everyone thought Rusty was the cock and needed to be revered.”

Maddox laughed and hugged Jonathan tightly. “Everyone’s here. Let’s go downstairs and you can thank them to your heart’s content. Be warned. They might want you to cook for them. Don’t cave under the pressure.”

“I don’t mind, as you know,” Jonathan said. “And Ray and Hanna are already here, so the pressure will be pretty high already.”

“You know what I think, babe?” Maddox dared to bring it up.

“What?”

“I get it that we’re too young and still studying...”

“Hmm...”

“But not for something that is less, let’s say, family-involving...”

“Yes...”

“How would you feel about getting engaged? For real?” Maddox finally mustered the courage to ask.

“You think that’s less family-involving?”

“Yeah. I mean, we can do it, all official and that, later, but I want something that’s just between you and me.”

He hoped he didn’t sound really lame by proposing such a thing. Jonathan surprised him by cupping his cheeks and kissing him on the nose tenderly. “I don’t see why not.”

“Good, so it’s a given. We’re going to do it, this summer.”

“Just let me know the date. Wait, so what is this going to be like? If we aren’t involving the family--”

“I’m going to think of something.”

As usual, it was true that Maddox hadn’t thought of all the details. But, with Jonathan, he knew that he would make them up as they went and everything would be great. There was nothing standing in their way, and he’d make sure that nothing ever would.

## *Epilogue*

Jonathan picked up his toiletries one by one and placed them carefully in a small bag, making sure not to knock over any of Ray's stuff by accident. It felt so strange to do these things in reverse. His mind took him to the first day of junior year, when he had stood there, in the exact same spot, pondering over how, most likely, his roommate would be some spawn of hell, since he had had only bad luck before coming there, to Sunny Hill. At the same time, he remembered that day as if it had just happened the day before, yet he perceived it as a distant memory from a lifetime ago. One thing he was entirely sure of. It was a dear memory.

"JJ!" Ray shouted from behind the door. "Where are you?"

"I'm here," he shouted back as an irrepressible grin broke from within. "I'm just collecting my last things."

"Grab mine, too, please! We're going to be late for the most awesome party of the year!"

The Amazing Four wouldn't be called that if they didn't throw a party to celebrate the end of the year, Maddox had informed him. That meant that the deal was to empty their dorm room, drag all their stuff to the house where Maddox had lived over the year with his friends, party until the wee hours of the morning and then saddle up and leave for home directly. Jonathan would have argued that it wasn't the most convenient plan, but Ray had begged him, with stars in his eyes, that he wanted the experience of getting tired out of his eyeballs, sleep in a room with fifty or so other people, and then embark on his ride home with bloodshot eyes and a hangover.

Yeah, when his bestie put things in perspective like that, it had to be part of college life to get to that state of exhaustion by having fun until they dropped. Jonathan wasn't sure it would truly count as fun, but who was he to argue, anyway?

He walked out of the bathroom with his arms full of Ray's toiletries. The famous and infamous backpack leaned against the wall, already full to the brink. Jonathan had yet to decipher the mystery of what Ray had in there. Probably his entire collection of board games that had only gotten bigger with Hanna around.

He handed Ray the remaining items only to be met with a forlorn look. "Where am I going to stuff all that?" he complained.

Jonathan offered him a sympathetic look. "Are you sure there is nothing in there you don't really need?"

"Definitely," came the unfazed reply. With a sigh, Ray grabbed the things and somehow found a way to stuff them all into one of the side pockets. "There," he said with satisfaction. "I'd hate to be a waster."

Jonathan hiked his own bag on his shoulder. In his case, he was travelling light after sending his books home first. “Ready to go, roomie?” he asked.

Ray let out a sigh that came from somewhere deep in his solar plexus. “Can you believe it, JJ? We survived junior year.”

“With flying colors, I’d like to think.”

“Totally.” Ray nodded eagerly. “I got a girlfriend, you got a boyfriend... Phew, I mean, going through all the finals was nothing compared to achieving that. I mean, we even got in the inner circle of the best group on campus.”

“Aren’t you supposed to say the most popular?”

“I don’t think that’s the most important thing when it comes to them. After getting to know them all, they’re nothing like the other popular kids I’ve ever met.”

“I believe you’re right about that.”

“Maddox really surprised you, didn’t he?” Ray grinned and nudged him in the ribs.

“Yes, without a doubt.” Jonathan smiled fondly.

“So,” Ray said with aplomb, “I heard that Maddox called you a bad boy.”

Jonathan feigned surprise. “You did?”

“Yeah, he was bragging to Dex that he’s the one actually dating a bad boy, and by that, obviously, he meant you.” Ray gave him a knowing look. “So, all this time, it was the other way around. You were afraid of bad boys, when you were one.”

“I will have to invoke the roommate code and ask you to keep it a secret from all the others. My reputation might suffer.”

“With your grades?” Ray snorted. “It would only make people finally believe that you’re not some android sent to make the rest of us look bad. I just don’t get how you manage to juggle both a boyfriend and studying like that!”

“Call it bad boy magic,” Jonathan said with a shrug. “You know how most villains are usually incredibly intelligent?”

“Don’t flatter yourself, JJ. You’re not villain material. Just be satisfied with the bad boy label. It’s all you’re going to get.”

Jonathan had nothing to add to that.

“JJ, do you think we can still be roommates next year?” Ray asked. “I mean, probably Maddox will want to be your roommate, and I have nothing against that--”

“Don’t worry, Ray. I talked to Maddox about it, and he agreed that we should postpone moving in together until we finish college.”

“Really? Was he really okay with that?” Ray didn’t hide his excitement well.

“Our parents told us that we need to prove ourselves, and it looks like Maddox is bent on impressing my folks by showing off how mature he can be about it all. In other words, we should focus on our studies first.”

“I bet it wasn’t that easy a decision to make, right?”

“I won’t risk answering that.” Jonathan grabbed Ray by the shoulders and squeezed hard. “Until the end of college, you’re the best roomie ever. Is that fine with you?”

“Yes. I hope Maddox doesn’t hate me already.”

“He would never,” Jonathan assured him. “I enticed him with the idea of sleepovers and sneaking around, and he got quickly on board.”

“Good. I like those ideas, too. I’m going to tell Hanna about them and see what she thinks.”

“Let’s go, Ray. Weren’t you the one saying that we’re going to be late to the party of the year?”

Ray took him by surprise by hugging him abruptly. “Thank you for this year, JJ. You’re my best friend ever.”

“Same here. You know, some might say you’re pretty emotional for a straight dude.”

Ray gave him a puzzled look and then he laughed. “You said ‘dude’.”

“Ah, well, I’m hanging out with quite the strange crowd if I can call it that.”

“And by that, I suppose you mean Rusty.” Ray gave him a fake sour look. “You know, not only Maddox was jealous over the Rusty incident.”

“I think I might have heard something to that effect,” Jonathan said in an airy tone. “Your worries are completely unfounded, Ray. Rusty is Maddox’s bestie, and I don’t think either of them would ever surrender that title.”

“Besties for life, right?”

“Besties for life,” Jonathan agreed. “Like you and me.”

“I’ll hold you to that fifty years from now. Don’t think I won’t.”

“Same here. It’s a promise.”

Jonathan gestured for Ray to walk out of the room first. He threw one last look over his shoulder. Would the room they would be in next year also seem so small, all of a sudden?

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*We just caught a whiff of something amazingly romantic, guys and gals of Sunny Hill! Maddox Kingsley proposed to his boyfriend Jonathan Hamilton, and the answer was a resounding ‘yes’. We promise to keep you posted on the proceedings, and maybe, just maybe, we can get someone to crash the wedding and take some really cool pictures. We wonder what sleeping arrangements will be made next year, if Maddox and Jonathan tie the knot this summer? We’ll wait and see.*

*Now, that we’ve got the sappy things out of the way, it is high time to get you up to speed with the latest news on the king of Sunny Hill just before you all leave the grounds – some of you for good. On top notch authority, we have it that Rusty Parker is into cat boys!*

*Yes, you heard that right. Rusty Parker is all willing to part with his cohort of female adorers only for the chance of petting a cat boy. We really have no idea where this is coming from, but that’s Rusty Parker for you, everyone. Always a surprise!*

*Wait, does that mean that Rusty is willing to ditch his straight ways, if we can use that term to define him, and head over to an alternative lifestyle? Hmm, it makes us wonder.*

It was a bit difficult to focus on reading the latest gossip with Jonathan giggling in his ear.

“Are we getting married now?” Maddox asked and rolled his eyes.

Jonathan shrugged. “It’s how this kind of journalism works. All it took was for Hanna to scream happily ‘Maddox and Jonathan are getting engaged’ while in an open space, and Xpress immediately grabbed it and turned it into a planned wedding, of course. But how did they find out about Rusty and cat boys? Wait, is that even true? It doesn’t sound like it’s true.”

“It’s actually true,” Maddox confirmed.

“Oh,” Jonathan said in that restrained way of his that might have come across to anyone else as arrogant and uptight. Not to him. To him, everything Jonathan did was adorable, no questions asked. “I’m afraid to ask.”

“Don’t be. If you ask Rusty, he’s going to give you the complete rundown on how and when his attraction toward a different kind of tail might have emerged.”

The music was thumping downstairs, but they had found a way to ditch the crowd and spend some time alone together on Maddox’s bed, lying on their bellies, swinging their feet in the air,

and reading the latest from Xpress. Basically, he was the one reading, since Jonathan was getting busy teasing his ear with one smart and deft tongue.

“Babe,” he drawled. “Come ‘ere.” He hooked one arm over Jonathan’s shoulders and pulled him close. Their lips found each other for a kiss.

“Hmm,” Jonathan purred and licked Maddox’s bottom lip with unhidden enthusiasm, “I thought you were about to tell me how Rusty got into cat boys.”

“Well, that’s a story that you better hear from him.”

“You think?”

“Without a doubt. Rusty might strangle me over missing some detail that should be in the original story.”

“Original story? What other stories are supposed to be out there?”

“I don’t know.” The truth was he didn’t care, not with Jonathan’s lips so close to his.

“Are we truly wise to be starting something like this right now?” Jonathan breathed out against his mouth.

“Wise? When were we ever?” Maddox tasted Jonathan’s lips in full, licking round and round and sucking the juicy bottom one into his mouth.

“Point taken,” Jonathan agreed and shivered. “I have a feeling someone’s going to burst in at any moment now.”

“Forget about that feeling. Let’s think about the summer.”

“I agree. I can barely wait to see you again next week.”

“I should just come with you,” Maddox said. “I hate losing entire days I could be spending with you.”

“I hate it, too,” Jonathan agreed. “But your mom agreed that you’re going to spend two months out of three with us, and I cannot ask for more. I’d look greedy.”

“Feel free to be greedy. Are your folks okay with you spending the rest of summer break with my family? We’re nothing fancy.”

“They are happy they’re going to get to see as much of us as they are. And by the way, I have some really serious plans for this summer. We’re not going to spend those two months at my family’s estate. We’d get bored out of our minds.”

“I kind of doubt that, but heck, if your mom and dad are going to watch our every move, I’m willing to go with whatever plans you have that remove us from under those hawk-like eyes,” Maddox joked.

“They will be plenty busy themselves. It’s summer, after all, my mom’s favorite season. But we might have to accompany them to a couple of places, just so, you know.” Jonathan swept Maddox’s hair out of his eyes. “You know what that means, right? They’re going to introduce you as a soon to be Hamilton.”

“Ugh, no pressure or anything, right?”

“Why would you feel pressure? You’re perfect.”

Maddox felt giddy whenever Jonathan praised him. If he had a tail, he’d wag it happily. Not a cat tail, though. Rusty and his ideas.

Too bad he had the special ability of summoning the cockblock police with just a thought. A loud knock on the door interrupted them, and Rusty barged into the room.

Only this time, he wasn’t alone. Dex, Kane, and even Hanna and Ray, were there.

“Dudes, why the hell are you wasting time when there’s a party?” Rusty bellowed.

“They’re busy smooching the hell out of each other,” Kane pointed out in a very teacher-like manner.

“You’ll have time to do that all summer, you dogs,” Dex chimed in.

“It’s our last night together till fall. Whether you two like it or not, you have to come with us,” Ray said. The most energetic of them all, he grabbed Maddox and began to pull him away from Jonathan. In turn, Jonathan suffered the same treatment from Hanna, who, despite her small frame, seemed to pack quite the strength. No wonder she could keep up with Ray and his board game marathons. She was more than met the eye.

She giggled and leaned in to whisper in his ear. “I know you two think we’re a bunch of assholes now, and you’d be right. The only smooching allowed tonight must be conducted at the party. So we’re petty assholes and don’t want you and Maddox to have your fun.”

“But it’s the privilege of having a private bedroom,” Maddox complained.

“Nothing’s private enough when you have me under the same roof,” Rusty declared. “Let’s lift them up, boys. I’m leading!”

Despite their protests, they were hiked up, held by legs and shoulders and carried away, down the stairs. It was difficult to imagine a more outstanding exit and a fitting end for their junior year.

Nah, it was all right, Maddox thought. He couldn't be mad at his friends. After all, he had Jonathan, and if they both suffered at the hands of these awesome guys, that meant they were in it together, all the way.

"Hey, watch it," he shouted at Rusty who almost ended up slipping down the stairs while dragging him by the legs. "I need to remain in one piece."

"At least until the wedding, right?" Kane laughed.

Dex was carrying Jonathan by the arms, while Hanna and Ray were splitting his legs between themselves. Maddox really hoped they were doing a better job than these two mofos. He needed Jonathan in one piece, as well.

They were finally placed on their feet at the foot of the stairs, and only then Maddox saw the giant cake. "What is that?" he asked.

Rusty held him by the shoulder. "See that figurine with the black hair? That's you. And the one with the brown hair--"

"Is it a wedding cake?"

A collective cheer from the entire crowd confirmed his suspicions. He turned toward his bestie.

"A mock wedding cake, and I got those figurines online. They're from an anime series," Rusty took care to inform him.

"Well, let's eat cake, then," Maddox said, deciding that it was just better to go with the flow. It looked like everyone wanted a piece of that cake, and he hoped he could at least save the figurines from the impending doom that would follow.

Someone, however, seemed to have drunken a bit too much and propelled by unknown forces, stumbled and fell, face first into the giant cake. Under the collective gasp and held breath of the audience, the tower of confectionary trembled and fell on one side.

"Five second rule," Rusty shouted.

All hell broke loose in an instant, everyone hurrying to get a piece that hadn't been in contact with the floor for too long.

Maddox turned toward Jonathan, who was shaking with laughter. "You wouldn't laugh if it was our real wedding cake," he said with a bit of rancor. He really had wanted to have a bite, preferably in a civilized manner.

"Cake fight!" Rusty announced.

A clump hit Maddox right in the cheek. Jonathan laughed harder and took a piece before the entire clump fell. He held his fingers to Maddox's lips. "Don't be mad, sweetheart. And here is your bite. I heard the initial plan involved Rusty coming out of the cake, most probably naked."

Maddox sighed and nibbled at the cake in Jonathan's fingers. "I suppose we should count our blessings, then."

"And they are many," Jonathan agreed. "Save a little for me?"

The kiss they shared next was the sweetest.

And it wasn't because of the cake.

***THE END***